Sociality and Materiality in World of Warcraft

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A thesis re-submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2016

Declaration

I, Nicholas Anthony Gadsby, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where

information has been derived from other sources, I conform this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The focus of my thesis is the role and status of control in the MMO *World of Warcraft* where one of the primary motivations for player engagement was to eliminate and marginalise contingency at sites across the game that were perceived to be prone to the negative effects of contingency, a process that its developers were to a significant degree complicit in.

My field sites traced the activities and lives of gamers across the physical location of London and the south east of the United Kingdom and their online game locations that constituted *World of Warcraft* and occasionally other online games which included the guild they were a member of that was called 'Helkpo'.

It examines how the transparency attributed to the game's code, its 'architectural rules', framed the unpredictability of players as problematic and how codified 'social rules' attempted to correct this shortcoming.

In my thesis I dive into the lives of the members of Helkpo as both guild members and as part of the expansive network that constituted their social lives in London. It demonstrates how the indeterminate nature of information in the relations in their social network contrasted with the modes of accountability that *World of Warcraft* offered, defined by different forms of information termed 'knowing' and 'knowledge'. This chapter considers how the certainties of the game produced a more reliable space for the enactment of English culture's social dualism of public and private.

I develop the argument that control should be considered as a legitimate issue of concern for studies of games and more broadly within processual anthropologies. I suggest that where contingency is ascribed cultural classification there is always the possibility that cultural forms of control may be employed to eliminate it. Importantly, I argue that as anthropologists the recognition of control as a meaningful product of culture, even under the indeterminate conditions of modernity, remains critical for the discipline.

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Acknowledgements

First of all, thank you to all the guild members of Helkpo, past and present for putting up with me for so many years through thick and thin. Thanks must also go to the ever-expanding role-playing group for their time also.

I'm incredibly grateful to Danny Miller for his brilliant supervision for the past four years, helping me develop my ideas, providing the most helpful criticism, his enthusiasm for my ideas which gave me growing confidence in what I was doing and putting up with my occasional extended absences and silences. Thank you so much to the great insights and guidance from my examiners Haidy Geismar and Thomas Malaby for inspiring me to try something different with my amendments. Thank you also to Lane DeNicola and Stefana Broadbent, for providing thoughts and ideas along the way and also Victor Buchli, Ludovic Coupaye and Susanne Kuechler who were always very enthusiastic about what I was doing. A general thanks must also go out to the Material Culture and Digital Anthropology departments as a whole for providing me with so much inspiration, even before I began my PhD and some truly excellent seminars.

Thanks also to all the dinner group members for discussing, critiquing my work and encouraging me – you all said the nicest things – Razvan Nicolescu, Alesya Krit, Tom MacDonald, Jo Sinanan, Dia Flores, Carol Balthazar, Julie Boticello, Julie Shackleford, Wallis Motta, Ivana Bajic, Roxana Morosanu, Aleksi Nutilla, Tiziana Traldi, Elizabthe D'Antonio and all the others who were involved. Other PhD students who were excellent friends – Gabi Ackroyd, Jeeva D and Aaron Parkhurst, timothy Carroll. I also need to thank all the one-time Masters students and friends – Nitasha Kapoor, Kat Braybrooke, Juliano Spyer and Thais Rocha, Andrew and Alysse Merrill, Ragnhild Freng Dale, Dale Simmons, Chloe Cook, Brian Schroer, Raissa Botterman, Lida Papmatthaiaki, Luiz Gabriel Vera, Peter Westman, Rafaela Peteanu, Kelly and Johnny Dance , Ian Williamson, Carl Storm, Matt Voigts, Puya Vakili, Anna Wojnarovska, Giustina Trevisi, Arnand Pilay, Cosimo Lupo, Susanna Inzoli, Angie Kim, Jen Robinson, Astrid Grue, Melissa Stelzer Reeve, Nina Train Chao and all the others I met along the way.

My biggest thank you goes to my wife, Phoebe for her eternal patience and tolerance with my study, I could not have done it without her. And my second biggest thank you goes to my daughter, Margot, who probably wonders why she never saw me at weekends.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: CONTROL AND GAMES

1.1. Introduction

I was hunched over a large coffee table in the lounge of a top floor flat located beside a busy main road in south London watching its tenants, Will and Theresa, carefully place on it a series of almost uniformly black game components. Outside the summer sun blazed and the sound of the passing traffic was just about audible over the buzz of the music that strove to create its own, more chilling, ambience. We were about to embark on a game of *Cave Evil*, a board game that pitted 'necromancer' against 'necromancer' through the creation of various monstrosities such as demons and the undead. The game had become something of a cult hit not least because of its artwork that drew openly on the genre of extreme heavy metal called 'Black Metal' – rendered in stark white on black, 'hand-drawn' in style, striving for an aesthetic of 'DIY' authenticity that harkened back to the fanzines and 'demo tapes' of the 1980s and early 90s. Visually it was a striking game that on the one occasion we had played in a pub in east London had gathered a small crowd of onlookers. But there was a more pressing matter at hand. As Will began dealing out the necessary pieces to each player, he explained that we'd been 'playing it wrong'. He paused and picked up the rulebook – a similarly grim-toned document of 44 pages titled 'Rules of War' - flicked through it, then pointed to a series of spaced-apart hexagons that ran around the edge of the game's board marked with a swirling 'maelstrom' known as the 'Awaken Track'. Will was resolute in his attempts to grasp the rules. This was the third time I had played the game and Will had played several times more, yet each session it seemed that we had misinterpreted at least one of the rules or some ambiguity arose that necessitated a detailed investigation of the rulebook so a decision might be made concerning the 'proper' way it should be played.

On this occasion our error had been to assume that the 'Awaken Track' consisted of every hexagon shape that constituted the edge of the game board, not just those bearing the 'maelstrom' symbol, when in fact the track consisted of just those hexagons that did. This revelation caused us to

reconsider the game. The 'Awaken Track' represented the ticks of a time bomb, a countdown the completion of which triggered an event called 'Evil Awakens' (the eponymous *Cave Evil*) unleashing a random malevolent entity on the board that players would have to factor into their plans in order to win the game. Our new understanding of the game meant that this was likely to occur much sooner than it had in previous games and our play session was charged with significantly more urgency and anticipation than was previously the case. During the session that followed the discovery of this rule there was significantly less conversation and those gathered round the table were more guarded: a distinct sense of uncertainty prevailed.

During my fieldwork I played many games like *Cave Evil* and it was not uncommon for there to be some ambiguity about the rules that was cause for debate, but the rules tended to fulfil the same purpose – they framed the goals and actions of players, providing both constraints and possibilities, but it was often the case that the more we learned about the rules, the more uncertain the outcomes were, as we discovered in *Cave Evil*. In my experience, at least, this was fairly typical of the way games worked; they were, in anthropologist Thomas Malaby's eloquent phrasing, "semibound and socially legitimate domains of contrived contingency that [generate] interpretable outcomes" (2007: 96).

The focus of my thesis is a 'game culture' that sought to accomplish the opposite of this – control - where one of the primary motivations for player engagement was to eliminate and marginalise contingency at sites across the game that were perceived to be prone to the negative effects of contingency, a process that its developers were to a significant degree complicit in. The game in question was the massively multiplayer online game (MMO) *World of Warcraft* developed by Californian company Blizzard Entertainment Inc., a digital game set in a vast 'fantasy' world that was played concurrently by thousands of people over the internet in which hierarchical player-organised groups called 'guilds' were a central social institution. The principle goal of the game's design was for players to advance their characters typically through the defeat of coded enemies and by the acquisition of in-game items – 'gear' or 'loot' – that helped improve a player's performance. My field

sites traced the activities and lives of gamers across the physical location of London and the south east of the United Kingdom and their online game locations that constituted *World of Warcraft* and occasionally other online games which included the guild they were a member of that was called 'Helkpo'.

Although control features as the primary theme of my study, in order to understand this term it was necessary to understand the dialectical relationship it had with contingency – the interplay of certainty and uncertainty; the determinate and the indeterminate. My thesis addresses these tendencies in games and at a more general level as themes that run through anthropology and related social science disciplines. It is concerned with how control was expressed and realised through the elimination of contingency and in my study this theme is articulated through the notion of the 'bureaucratic imagination' - a set of ideas and practices that drew on quotidian understandings of the efficacy of bureaucracy as a mode of order and control that recognised ideologies constructed around computer systems as media forms possessing the dual capability of embodying transparency as well as producing transparent knowledge.

Significantly control and contingency are not just considered in relation to the acts or intentions of individuals or groups, but to systems of cultural order and to the broader schemes that constituted them. It is my intention to employ my ethnographic findings to illuminate and reconsider the role of control within the remit of practice-based and processual anthropologies that have tended to privilege the open-ended and the contingent.

The body of the thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on exploring the internal 'game culture' of *World of Warcraft,* where the practices of individuals engaged in a game world that established a form of 'culture' could be studied as a coherent system in and of itself (Boellstorff 2006). It examines how the transparency attributed to the game's code, its 'architectural rules', framed the unpredictability of players as problematic and how codified 'social rules' attempted to correct this shortcoming.

The following chapter, Chapter 3, dives into the lives of the members of Helkpo as both guild members and as part of the expansive network that constituted their social lives in London. It demonstrates how the indeterminate nature of information in the relations in their social network contrasted with the modes of accountability that *World of Warcraft* offered, defined by different forms of information termed 'knowing' and 'knowledge'. This chapter considers how the certainties of the game produced a more reliable space for the enactment of English culture's social dualism of public and private.

This dualism is pursued further in Chapter 4 which focuses on the role of the fantasy genre in and out of the game. It examines the way the genre constituted a privileged site of privacy formed by the indeterminacy of experiences of enchantment and the obscurity of 'geeky' knowledge that was deemed risky in social contexts. It considers how players of *World of Warcraft* overcame this issue by side-lining the fantasy elements of the game, transforming it into a rare site for engagements with the rational.

The final chapter, 5, turns attention to the producers of the game, Blizzard Entertainment. Although it was not possible to carry out fieldwork at the company, it takes advantage of the huge volume of public materials Blizzard produced that detailed many, although not all, of their approaches and goals for the game. It examines how Blizzard's desire for a top-down control both shaped and was complicit with the goals of players and how ambiguous player-facing concepts such as 'fun' and 'change' enabled them to imagine control in the face of unpredictable outcomes.

In the conclusion I develop the argument that control should be considered as a legitimate issue of concern for studies of games and more broadly within processual anthropologies. I suggest that where contingency is ascribed cultural classification there is always the possibility that cultural forms of control may be employed to eliminate it. Importantly, I argue that as anthropologists the recognition of control as a meaningful product of culture, even under the indeterminate conditions of modernity, remains critical for the discipline.

1.2. Defining Control

Given the centrality of control to my thesis, it's my intention to establish what I mean by the term early in the study. While the specific extent and forms of control I recount vary across the study, I define it as the elimination, reduction or marginalisation of contingency.

This may be viewed as a fairly broad definition of the term, which I excuse partly on the grounds that the reality of any analysis borne of ethnographic fieldwork has to apply some latitude to the terms it uses, but it also effectively describes what the gamers in my study accomplished within the purview of *World of Warcraft*. It is also the case, as I have stated, that my thesis is concerned not just with control but its relationship with contingency and related concepts such as indeterminacy and uncertainty, so the fact that my definition of control also entails an understanding of these terms is no accident. It recognises that there was a sometimes inevitable relationship between the concepts of control and contingency and that occasionally the boundary between the two was fuzzy and difficult to discern. Importantly the relative ascription of my definition acknowledges that the categories of control and contingency were cultural accomplishments rather than an inherent state of things.

I will clarify precisely what I mean by 'cultural accomplishment' in the section dedicated to culture below, but it will become apparent as my study unfolds that in some cases occurrences that might be thought of as a product of contingency were understood through the frame of control and vice versa. For example, in *World of Warcraft* the repeated failure of players in group encounters with powerful game-controlled enemies was understood not as an unpredictable outcome of the game, but a process by which contingency was gradually removed from the performances of players until it matched that of a pre-figured strategy which was in itself thought to be a representation of the game's underlying mechanics. From the opposite perspective, Thomas Malaby, in his study of how Linden Lab developed the digital platform *Second Life*, a 'virtual world' where players were given the tools to make virtually anything they could imagine, explains that the company's control of the platform was predicated on the productive possibilities of the tools they gave to players who used them in

unexpected ways (2009). In this case the system, the coded architecture of the game, over which Linden Lab exerted control was intentionally conceived to produce contingent outcomes.

What these examples suggest is that within games, control and contingency are, at some incipient level, essential dialectical components - that the precondition for one has to be met by the presence of the other in some form and to some extent even if one side invariably exceeds or is granted primacy over the other. My initial interest in the relationship between control and contingency in games must be credited to work of anthropologist Thomas Malaby whose work on games is exemplary and whose definition of games I quote in the opening section of this introduction. His inspired account of games as 'domains of contrived contingency' (2007) prepared the groundwork for my examination of the role of control in *World of Warcraft* and it is my hope that this study provides an alternative, but complimentary understanding of games that seeks to find a place for the role of control. That is, if control is defined as the elimination of contingency and it is admitted that no game can be entirely contingent then there is by this logic always some degree of control present in games, no matter how limited that may be.

However, from an anthropological perspective this generic position is an incomplete account of games in practice. What Thomas Malaby has achieved in his work on contingency in games is to produce empirical ethnographic accounts of great anthropological value because they provide examples of the cultural significance of contingency - whether this concerned gambling in a Greek city (2003) or governance of the virtual world *Second Life* (2009) – which is then employed to account for the more general propensities of contingency as a theoretical concern and a characteristic of modern life. This was arguably most successfully accomplished in his study of how Linden Lab governed *Second Life* through giving up a degree of control over the content of the platform and how this expressed a broader 'technoliberal' ideology in which producers could exploit the creativity of users that was prevalent in various modern instructional forms such as the free market and democratic elections (2009).

While I do not claim that my study reveals the same kinds of novel ideological turns, it is my intention to provide an account for *World of Warcraft* as a site that could be defined by a range of different ideas and practices that sought to eliminate, curtail or otherwise reduce contingency. If contingency was identified in various ways as uncertainty, indeterminacy, disorder, failure and risk, then control figured as strategies of certainty, finitude, predictability, rationalisation and order all of which were conceived in some sense as operating against the generation of contingency. Control could vary in scope and intensity: in some cases it was more fundamental as in the relationship between metrical statistics, such as 'average item level', that described the quality of a player's in-game gear and a player's status which was largely incontestable; at other times it was more relative, such as the accountability of players to one another and to the guild that was more negotiable and less restrictive. But the fundamental concern of my study is not to advocate that contingency was in all cases completely eradicated in any absolute sense, but that it was marginalised in terms of its cultural significance.

As a final point to aid further understanding of the definition of control I work with, I also want to clarify what it is not, which is probably just as useful a procedure in terms of understanding the scope of its analytical application. Firstly it is not fundamentally deterministic, even if it was believed to be so by the London gamers in my study. That is, control did not intrinsically guarantee outcomes in terms of universalistic and inflexible laws, rather control is used to describe conditions and practices wherein outcomes were considered more likely to occur as much as there is a probabilistic component to any kind of control (Hacking 1990). Control then is applied in a relativistic sense, in terms of both the outcomes it accounted for and the understanding of it I accord to the London gamers whose lives I immersed myself in during fieldwork.

To this point, control in the most general sense was invoked where the actions of people were seen to threaten the relations of cultural order, whether that was the game culture or English culture. Its remit then has clear relevance to Sahlins' notion of 'structural transformation' (1985) discussed briefly

in the section on 'culture' below and in significant detail in chapters 2 and 3. As such the sites of contingency against which control was directed were most commonly that of 'social contingency', 'performative contingency' and 'semiotic contingency' as described by Thomas Malaby (2007).

1.3. Control in Games

Having expanded on my definition of the form control took in *World of Warcraft,* in this section I want to address this issue in regard to some of the existing literature on games in order to provide some context and comparative examples for my study.

Within this literature there is little that is explicitly concerned with the subject of control, but there are a small number of works which have addressed related concepts such as discipline and surveillance. All of these works contain some consideration of what is termed 'emergent' practices in digital games, the meaning of which I will explain shortly. If there is a reason for this coincidence of control and emergence it is precisely because emergence is usually associated with the opposite of these terms – the liberation or freedom of players. Most of the papers here, then, express surprise that emergent practices may be developed in ways that control or coerce and one of them considers how such practices legitimise this remit without the benefit of centralised control. This astonishment reveals a prevailing assumption in the literature on games in which it is implied that the designed architecture of games are *de facto* legitimate sites of constraint and determinism and that freedom is exclusive to the emergent practices of players. At the end of this section I critique these assumptions and explain how in this thesis all rules and their legitimacy, designed or player produced, are outcomes of emergence. Before doing so however I consider existing scholarly accounts of emergence and its relationship with control.

The work of T.L Taylor (2006a) and Bonnie Nardi (2010) in different ways touch on this theme, although the principal concern of both is the way 'emergence' is conventionally presented in studies of games. The importance of the concept of emergence to studies of games has always lain in its challenge to the deterministic qualities often attributed to the architectural rules of games and this

has frequently been expressed in terms of forms of emancipation - a liberation from the rules in which power asymmetries between producer and user are framed as innately oppressive. In *Communities of Play*, Celia Pearce provides a number of examples of emergent play where players do things collectively that the designers and a game's architecture did not intend for, including the buying and selling of in-game items for 'real' money, the organisation of in-game protests by players that attempt to crash the game and in-game weddings and funerals for players (2009). Pearce presents these kinds of acts as inherently positive expressions of freedom and the prohibition or restriction by designers of these kinds of acts as stifling the possibilities of game systems.

Taylor and Nardi both urge caution about assuming that emergence is innately liberatory. Taylor dedicates the greater portion of her paper to the discussion of the use of player-made 'modifications' (also known as 'mods' or 'addons'), player-made pieces of software that could alter the functionality of a player's user-interface in *World of Warcraft*. Although these technologies could be used at an individual level by players to monitor their personal performance, they also had the functionality to be used at collective levels so that the performances of players could be monitored by others. She describes them as "an extensive network of tools and functions that consistently monitor, surveil, and report at a micro level a variety of aspects of player behaviour" (2006b: 12). These emergent player technologies and associated practices then appeared to be concerned with quite the opposite of player liberation and were often used to in some way control the performances of players. Her wider concern was that such technologies had previously been the privilege of high-end 'power gamers' but had become normative within MMOs, a development my thesis attests to, and that as such 'coercion' was becoming common to engagement within the game demonstrating how "systems of stratification and control can arise from the bottom up and be strongly implemented" (ibid: 17).

Although she attributed this more aggressive form of control to the affordances these technologies offered, she also explains how she observed attempts to coerce other types of behaviour in the game, such as the use of non-English languages on servers described as 'English speaking' and discriminatory

practices against players perceived as being 'too young'. Whilst Taylor's intention is to draw attention to how these practices problematized emergence as exclusively emancipatory, her work also points to the wider cultural shift in *World of Warcraft* towards defining a much stricter set of appropriate performative criteria, including issues as diverse as language and age. As I go onto explain, within the game culture of *World of Warcraft* these kinds of behaviours were classified as contingent acts which legitimised coercive behaviour and in this way some emergent behaviours were acceptable and others were not.

Nardi broaches the issue of emergence in a different way. She exposes the possibility that the absence of emergent practices in a game should not be presupposed as a sign of the inherently oppressive nature of game designers (2010). For *World of Warcraft* she argues that the constraints imposed by the game's rules, its architecture, were actually used as resources that maintained the integrity of the gaming experience for players – in other words players' engagement with the game was predicated on the rules as defined by the producers, not those that emerged out of player action (2010). In her ethnography she explains how many of the players she met described the game's design with great enthusiasm and how the structure of the architecture motivated players to experience content requiring the commitment of many days of time to do so. She contrasts the engaging nature of *World of Warcraft*'s consistent and harmonious aesthetic with *Second Life*, which she describes as a 'junk heap' (ibid: 78) and quotes Malaby's description of it as "ugly, trashy and junk-filled" (2006). Nardi also expresses some ambivalence toward the impact of the kind of player-produced 'mods' discussed by Taylor because they could disrupt the aesthetic intended by the game's designers.

Although Nardi did not state that players were subject to control by the rules, what I want to draw attention to is the way she describes rules as 'resources' - that players chose to observe them because doing so produced a powerful sense of engagement. In a later chapter on the subject of 'addiction', however, she also suggests that this term was used by some players to describe the compelling quality of its rules, which hints at a kind of quite extreme form of control the game could be seen to engender.

In holding to the rules and valuing the rules we might detect, albeit subtly, the desire to efface the possibility for contingency, that Nardi construes as productive of 'junk' in the case of *Second Life*. Although Nardi is adamant that in valuing the architectural rules of *World of Warcraft* the behaviour of players did not constitute an emergent practice, an alternative understanding of the decisions of players to do so might suggest that it was just as emergent as any other form of unpredictable player response to a game, it's just that it did not fit the 'liberatory' character that was normally attributed to the phenomenon. In viewing it this way we might even stretch to an argument for a very minor form of control that entirely defined as contingent anything that was not conceived as the outcome of the designed architecture of the game.

The argument stated above might only tenuously convey the application of control but one kind of practice in the game that was an unequivocal site of control was that of 'Dragon Kill Points' systems (DKP). These were systems of points allocation used to measure player commitment to a guild (Malone 2009) and facilitate the distribution of in-game items acquired by groups of players, usually members of the same guild. The purpose of DKP systems was to eliminate a form of social contingency associated with the claims players made for items acquired from encounters during group forms of play. In a typical scenario a group of ten or twenty five players would work together to defeat a powerful 'raid' boss who would 'drop' a small number of powerful in game items (say two to five), each of which several players might express desire for. The question was then: who should get these items? This kind of scenario was routinely fraught with anxiety and there was always the concern that a player might simply lay claim to an item spuriously or even take an item without the approval of other participants. In these moments the unpredictability of other players was highly problematic.

DKP systems were player-produced numerical systems that awarded players points for commitment to guild activities and these points could then be spent on the acquisition of items that dropped from raid bosses. Commitment to a guild was the basis on which a player could make legitimate claims to

an item. Where previously commitment had been difficult to measure, through DKP it was rationalised - its indeterminate qualities were diminished and its status was made unambiguous. As such, individuals who made claims to items could only do so if they possessed the requisite number of Dragon Kill Points to do so and it effectively reduced the social contingency that was associated with the unpredictable acts of players by assigning a non-negotiable score to every participant, constraining the kinds of legitimate claims to items players could make and helped make the process of loot distribution more orderly and considerably less fraught.

Because the DKP system was an exclusively player-created feature that manifested in 'mods' that could be added to the game's interface by players, it has excited a fair volume of academic interest. Economists Fairfield and Castranova hold it up as an example of the success of free-markets through the self-enforcing legitimacy of the DKP system that functioned in the absence of a centralised coercive authority, such as the game producer or indeed government (2007). Their argument is given strength in their suggestion that DKP compelled adherence to the system because to abuse it would result in what they describe as 'social death': that is, the coercive efficacy of the system functioned because of its socially sustained legitimacy.

Malone offers an anthropological account that is more concerned with the kinds of value produced by these systems (2009), but it shares with Fairfield and Castranova an interest in how they legitimised and were legitimised by social relations. She explains how the authority of guild leaders was established through DKP systems because they mediated between collective advancement - by measuring the commitment of players to the collective entity of a guild - and individual progress - through the acquisition of points that could be exchanged for items that increased a player's performative possibilities and status. In this matrix points operated as both reciprocally exchangeable economic capital and cultural capital that reflected a player's accomplishments (2009). She also notes how these systems created a sense of obligation towards the guild, that they "force[d] participation

of members" (ibid: 314) because the value of points they acquired was exclusive to the guild that awarded them and if they wished to acquire gear they had to earn points through this system exclusively.

Silverman and Simon's paper on DKP represents the most overt account of how these systems were used to exert control through their direct comparison with the disciplinary functions of modern institutions such as prisons and schools as articulated by Foucault (2009). In this comparison guilds are glossed as "modern institutions complete with organizational technologies that act to classify, sort, and coordinate players in terms of the primary mode of production of the game" (ibid: 357), the process of levelling and accomplishments in the game are compared to the sorting of human subjects in terms of seniority, rank and specialisation and DKP is described as "a disciplinary technology for producing gameplay as a form of rationalized labor" (ibid: 364). The authors acknowledge the papers by Fairfield and Castranova and Malone discussed but question the claims they make regarding the manner in which these systems produce commitment, instead they suggest that they function by disciplining players into participating in a way that transforms them into subjects that view the game in these terms. Because DKP systems are visible to all players and the status of players in terms of points becomes explicit, they suggest that they have a 'panoptic effect' in which players alter their behaviour in order to excel within the system – 'docile' bodies of players are then constituted as subjects to be "shaped, corrected and deployed" (ibid: 371) to the production of the values the system extols.

In the second half of their paper Silverman and Simon perform a *volte-face*, stating that the productivity disciplined in the bodies of players is essentially valueless as at any point they may step outside the system on which its legitimacy hangs, which is perhaps overly dismissive of the value players may attribute to the representation of their commitment in the system and the social relations that sustain it. The first part of their paper however is more interesting because in their account of

control the system actually shapes the subjectivity of players at the fundamental level of how they conceive the game and their place in it. What they don't succeed in doing in the first half of their study, which the papers of Fairfield and Castranova and Malone do achieve, is to account for the complicity of players in making this system a legitimate site for control.

Regardless of this shortcoming of Silverman and Simon's paper, all three of these papers illustrate that control has been a concern in MMOs and was particularly so for *World of Warcraft*, where, as Taylor (2006b) and Silverman and Simon (2009) observe, the instrumental and rationalising attitudes towards the game once exclusive to only the most 'hardcore' players and the associated use of technologies of control had become considerably more normative.

While my thesis picks up from the point at which these papers leave off, and confirms the ubiquity of the concept of control in the game, there is a further issue that I address that concerns the legitimisation of control. What all five of these scholarly works imply in different ways in their investigations of the consequences of player-produced technologies used in *World of Warcraft* and in other MMOs is that the architecture of the game as designed by the developers is, in terms of how it is rendered meaningful, entirely distinct from player-produced modifications to the game. Fairfield and Castranova express surprise at the way DKP systems function without the presence of a centralised form of coercion (2007) and Taylor reveals concern that players might not be aware that player 'modifications' were not part of the original code of the game (2006b). In these accounts it appears to be assumed that the code of the game as envisioned by its designers is somehow legitimate simply because of its 'official' status. Yet this is evidently not the case as videogames and MMOs are routinely rejected by players who choose not to engage them or, as may be the case, engage them despite the fact they don't find them engaging.

What these studies overlook, an issue I wish to rectify in my thesis, is that games are legitimised by players through the way they engage it – that is, legitimacy is not inherent in the designed architecture of a game. Given this, a further accusation may be levelled at the assumptions made in these studies, which is that whilst player-produced 'mods' are seen to be open to negotiation, the designed game is not. Inherent in this view is a deterministic view of rules as constraining action rather than producing it. Nardi's discussion of rules as 'resources' (2010) is interesting in this case because she appreciates the way the players *chose* to value the designed rules because they enabled the kind of engagement they desired. The rules of a game, its architecture, could be engaged and legitimised in various ways - they did not inherently constrain, because if they did 'emergence' would not be possible, and if they were used to constrain this was, as Taylor realised (2006b), a consequence of the emergent practices of players.

My understanding of games and the way rules operated in them in this study, then, is informed by the view that players made choices about what the rules meant and how they operated. For single player games this could be (and often was) highly subjective, but for multiplayer games 'game cultures' (Boellstorff 2006) could emerge that engendered normativity in terms of the 'proper' way or ways a game should be engaged and the kinds of practices that constituted this. Further this kind of normativity could produce the meaningfulness of the rules in many different ways, as say liberatory or alternatively as controlling. Perhaps controversially then I present rules as inherently emergent. As such, control was not a quality inherent to *World of Warcraft*'s rules or even the mods made by players, it was a consequence of the normative form of engagement players participated in and was reflected in and expressed through the wide range of media through which this cultural form was realised.

I recognise the danger in this assertion - that by reducing everything to 'emergence' the value of the term is threatend and importantly its analytical worth reduced. I have attempted to overcome the

limitations I see in the term emergence by developing an analytic device that I apply throughout the study which is the distinction between 'architectural rules' and 'social rules'. The architectural rules were all those rules players perceived to originate in the code of the game, importantly this was not restricted to the designed code, but also the 'mods' made by players that were seen to represent this code and the player resources that described the game's mechanics and that players viewed as largely isomorphic with the code. Social rules on the other hand were viewed as those rules that did not inhere in the code but were logical extensions of it.

I also recognise that a game's architecture did provide some constraints. For example *World of Warcraft* did not provide the same creative tools as digital platforms such as *Second Life* and *Minecraft* that enabled players to create their own content in the game world and these games did not offer the same kinds of linear content that *World of Warcraft* did. It was quite clear that *World of Warcraft* appealed to gamers who enjoyed linear videogames and multiplayer games, but at the same time almost all of the gamers in this study played other videogames including 'sandpit' games like *Minecraft*, which for a time had a Helkpo guild server, and open-world single player games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. I also acknowledge that the design decisions that Blizzard made shaped player engagement, but that their decisions were also shaped by the way players engaged the game. In Chapter 5 I explore some of the ways Blizzard was complicit in cultivating control and how they explored ways to make this work commercially.

What I show in my thesis is that in *World of Warcraft* rules were resources for the assertion of control and it was players who granted them legitimacy. Rules were explicitly invoked to encourage a finite set of acts that were interpreted as appropriate within the narrow confines of what the game was believed to be about, while striving to remove or delegitimise those acts that were not. Although *World of Warcraft* was not as open-ended a system as say *Second Life* that allowed players to create

content of virtually any form, there still remained a wide degree of latitude in terms of what players *could* do, yet the rules were specifically employed to constrain the kinds of acts deemed legitimate.

1.4. Culture

A key concern for the anthropological study of games is 'culture'. In the previous section 'Defining Control' I alluded to the significance of control and contingency as 'cultural accomplishments' and I will expand on that issue in this section. To begin with however I intend to briefly discuss the importance of culture for the anthropological study of games. The cultural dimensions of my study proved to be crucial to understanding the specific way gamers in London engaged *World of Warcraft* and the kind of digital artifact the game was for them. Boellstorff has argued that it is incumbent on anthropology to illuminate the relationship between culture and games (2006) and he highlights anthropology's commitment to a processual conception of culture that differs from the more static and fixed expressions of the term used by other disciplines in their accounts of games.

What this makes possible is both the study of games as systems in themselves and the relation they have as systems with other domains of culture. Although games to varying degrees have long been included in anthropological studies, when they have been the subject of detailed examination the inclination has been to view them as no more than 'reflections' of culture rather than as sites that are generative of it. For example, Malaby proposes that Geertz's famous account of Balinese cockfighting is guilty of this kind of reductionism (2007). Although Geertz provides a fascinating account of the symbolic and cosmological values of Balinese culture that are represented in cockfights as well as what he terms 'deep play', where the commitments of participants transcend the utilitarian value of the stakes (1973), Malaby motions that Geertz's insistence that the game had no consequences, that nothing changed, is indicative of a marginalisation of games as sites for the generation of culture.

In terms of digital games, Boellstorff imagines one way in which games could be conceived as sites for the generation of culture is in the notion of the 'gaming of culture' a state in which culture is transformed by the metaphor of games (2006). This is arguably manifest in the concept of

'gamification' – the adoption of features of games into other domains such as business (e.g. McGonigle 2012) - and is also explored in the work of Malaby on governance (2009, 2013). In this study however, my concern was directed as much toward the ways that culture might shape a game. This felt particularly relevant given that *World of Warcraft* was made by a North American games developer yet during my ethnography was a thoroughly English site for the production of sociality. The recent work on Englishness and social media produced by Daniel Miller (2015, 2016) demonstrates how North American software, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, was transformed into a carefully calibrated expression of degrees of English sociality with which users were comfortable, regardless of the specific ideas the developers had in mind when they designed them. *World of Warcraft* was somewhat different to these social media platforms in that unlike the examples Miller discusses it produced its own internal game culture, yet even given this precondition it was remarkable how it figured as a site better able to manage the tensions that characterised English sociality.

My thesis then is concerned with a processual understanding of culture in which games are productive sites for culture and are also sites at which prior forms of culture may be re-articulated. The longitudinal duration of my study (in excess of 9 years) meant that I was in a fortunate position to see how the changing architecture of the game affected people's engagements with it and the relations it mediated. It also granted me a temporal perspective on the ways the developers, Blizzard, altered the game in response to the behaviour of players and in line with the internal goals of the business. This processual approach to the anthropology of games also extended to the way I sought to understand control and contingency.

This brings my discussion back to the earlier claim I made that control and contingency were cultural accomplishments. What I anticipate by this is that throughout my thesis I have attempted to understand control and contingency as the products of culture, not simply as the inherent properties of states, events, people or things. The examples I referred to earlier that showed how unpredictable performance in *World of Warcraft* was understood as a process of elimination of contingency and how

the proprietorially controlled software tools of *Second Life* were designed to produce unpredictable outcomes demonstrated the way that the meanings of control and contingency might be framed around actions that had the potential to be interpreted differently.

Anthropology provides numerous examples of how things may be culturally interpreted in ways that run counter to expectations, including those concerned with control and contingency. One of the most fascinating examples comes from Evans-Pritchard's study of witchcraft among the Azande where almost all 'unfortunate events', contingent events that entailed misfortune, were attributed to 'witchcraft' (1976). "Witchcraft" Evans-Pritchard explains "participates in all misfortunes and is the idiom in which Azande speak about them. Witchcraft is a classification of misfortunes which while differing from each other in other respects have this single common character, their harmfulness to man" (ibid: 19). While acts of witchcraft were always unpredictable, if highly quotidian, significantly the ultimate cause of an incident was not viewed as indeterminate, but as an act of selected malicious intent by a witch against an individual, usually attributed to the jealous feelings of someone in the village toward the victim. This can be viewed in the general terms of theodicy, the process by which misfortune is accounted for. But it should also cause us to ask questions about the role and extent of contingency and what the identification of a causal agent of a misfortune might mean and certainly complicates the notion of an exclusively contingent 'accident'.

But what, if anything, does this mean for control? Evans-Pritchard provides an in-depth explanation of the Zande logic behind witchcraft that "brings a man into relation with events in such a way that he sustains injury" (1976: 23). What this means is that there were many things in the world that had the potential to be harmful to people – fire is hot and had the potential to burn people, elephants are big and strong and had the potential to crush or injure people - and accidents, such as the collapse of a granary might occur because termites had eaten their way through its supports, but witchcraft functioned by determining that these potential harms and the presence of the victim occur at the same time. In the case of personal misfortune there was no such thing as *just* coincidence, for a Zande

the 'coincidence' was caused to happen, it was in effect under the control of a witch. Viewed in this way witchcraft for the Azande presents a remarkable combination of contingent events and controlled outcomes reflecting the ways in which the two concepts may be tangled up in cultural accounts.

The question for the anthropologist is: how should an event like this be interpreted? Can we say that, taboos and other transgressions aside, in the case of harmful things happening to people, there is no such thing as misfortune - a purely contingent event? That the phenomenon of witchcraft was a cultural form of control for the Azande because as a concept it marginalised the role of pure contingency to account for misfortune?

Evans-Pritchard describes witchcraft as the 'socially relevant' cause because "it is the only one which allows intervention and determines social behaviour" (1976: 25), so however we might characterise witchcraft analytically, for the Azande it was witchcraft that mattered and therefore determined their cultural apprehension of these instances of everyday misfortune and as such while purely contingent accidents could happen, those mishaps attributed to witches were only unpredictable for the victim, for the witch the outcome was effectively pre-determined. With a view to the wider cultural practices of Zande people we may identify various forms of cultural acts that sought to obviate misfortune, taboo advised upon the avoidance of actions that were believed to cause mishap, witch doctors provided defence against witches, and oracles could see future uses of witchcraft and mitigate against them.

Not every reader will be comfortable with the term control in describing Zande culture, but it is quite evident in Evans-Pritchard's account that where injury or other harm to individuals was concerned 'accident' was a largely irrelevant category and that recurrent efforts were made to curtail the possibility for unpredictable acts of witchcraft to be enacted against its victims. This is not to suggest that Zande people did not experience contingent events, Evans-Pritchard goes to great lengths to demonstrate that they did, rather as a class of event they were not typically relevant to events that resulted in individual misfortune, contingency of this kind was then marginalised.

Developing the theme presented in the specific example of Azande witchcraft I want to further explain how to employ this cultural understanding of control and contingency in theoretical terms. I'm going to begin by examining one of the most instructive arguments Malaby has made in relation to the role of contingency, which is that contra the conventional stance in the social sciences that views indeterminacy as fundamentally problematic, equal validity should be given to the possibility for more positive engagements with contingency (2003). Drawing on philosopher Alasdair McIntyre's characterisation of life under the conditions of modernity as fundamentally uncertain (1981), Malaby implies that contingency defines the general texture of day to day life. While uncertainty is defined as a characteristic of modernity that sees the certainties of tradition overturned by rupture I also take it that, even if contingency is ever present, this does not preclude the possibility for forms of control. Claims for the death of the nation state (e.g. Appadurai 1996), for example, have largely failed to come to pass and the attempts by states to assert their dominion remains as relevant as ever, even if in some domains such as global finance, control is considerably more precarious.

My purpose for pointing this out is to make an analogous argument for anthropology when we are looking at culture. While the theoretical trends in the discipline posit a processual understanding of culture defined by its open-endedness and in which contingency performs a significant role (Ortner 1984) cultures still express forms of order to greater or lesser degrees, that is, there are categories and values that people try to retain even in the face of change. This tension is brilliantly expressed in Sahlins' understanding of the tension between 'structure' and 'history' (1985). Structure represents the relations of order that constitute a culture while history describes the contingent events that occur that invariably alter the former. Sahlins' claims that 'history', as the process of inevitable change, is not just an external force, it occurs in the performance of culture itself which always contains within its categories the risk of altering the relations of order that constitute a culture's values and meanings. In a simple sense, while change is inevitable, culture strives to reproduce itself.

The most well-known account of the perdurance of 'structure' is found in what Lévi-Strauss termed 'cold' societies (1966). Lévi-Strauss developed the oppositional concepts of 'cold' and 'hot' societies where the latter embraced history and change and the former sought to appropriate history into stable structures that preserved the existing cultural order, thus denying the possibility that historical change could genuinely alter a society's structures and values.

The manner in which so-called 'cold' societies sought to accomplish this 'denial of history' is a matter of interest for my study because while it admits contingency in the form of inevitable change, it suggests that the cultural representation and plausibility of control is just as significant as its practical instantiation. Lévi-Strauss suggests that a general principle that accounted for the way 'cold' societies maintained the illusion of stability is that history, rather than being rejected outright, was understood to be nothing more than a reflection of the past or was actually predicted in the past (1966), in either case this meant was that whatever the consequence of an unpredictable event was, it was not viewed as a contingent or unpredictable outcome. Contingency then was annulled because an event was not interpreted as, or understood to be, contingent but was held to be an example of the prior structure.

Contingent events then were not acknowledged as such by the cultural logic of 'cold' societies. Lévi-Strauss proposes that this was made possible by the finitude of the cultural systems they operated that were presented by a fixed set of prior categories, such as ancestors, that always determined the total form of society such that nothing fundamentally new could be added to it to change its structure. Lévi-Strauss acknowledged that this strategy for the negation of the contingent was not always successful, that it represented an ideal that was not necessarily borne out, but, he argued, it remained a powerful cultural value that was legitimised by the belief in fixed categories of ancestors or other prior beings.

Although Lévi-Strauss's form of structuralism is often held up as a counter-example of processual approaches because it allowed little room for the actions of people, and there is also an evident romantic strain to his idealisation of 'cold' societies, to dismiss the notion that cultures and the people

who participate in them may express conservative tendencies and look to ways to reproduce them as unchanging and stable is short-sighted. The value of the notion of the cold 'society' for my study is that it provides a conceptual precedent for the engagement of control and contingency that demonstrates the possibility for and the means by which contingency may be made meaningful in terms of control, and this has evident discernible value to a study that has a game at its centre.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the conclusions I arrive at in my thesis suggest that the kinds of control that *World of Warcraft* engendered were employed toward the stabilisation of naturalised categories that were viewed as in some way at risk and that could be understood to express a desire to preserve more traditional, conservative even, values and practices. This was, in part at least, because of the way contingency permeated the lives of these London gamers. I suggest that this was evident in the objective status of knowledge attributed to the game's architecture that contrasted with the relative status of information in social networks and private domains characterised by fantasy. Crucially the control this absolute knowledge promised offered to produce a more reliable way to order the tradition of public and private domains of English sociality that were otherwise fraught with uncertainty. I make similar claims for the developers of *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard Entertainment, who operated the game in a traditional top-down manner that even when it acknowledged more open-ended forms of governance always did so in its own terms.

1.5. Disenchantment and Enchantment

The final theme I address is that of disenchantment and enchantment. Although the thought of including another dualism in my thesis was initially unattractive given the central role of the dualism of control and contingency, the ethnographic facts forced my hand. During my fieldwork it became apparent that the fantasy genre, here used broadly to incorporate science fiction, horror and superheroes, had a significant role in the lives of London gamers that functioned as a media for the production of enchantment. On the other hand the knowledge production and action that legitimised notions of control in *World of Warcraft* was predicated on rationalised forms of information and action

that could conveniently be framed in terms of 'disenchantment'. That both fantasy and rationalised knowledge and action were present in *World of Warcraft*, albeit in a distinctly asymmetrical way, further solidified the need to account for these terms.

Before elaborating on the issues that arose in the application of these terms to the findings on my thesis I want to briefly explain the legitimising form around which control was conceived. This was essentially a form of knowledge about the game's coded architecture that was conceived by players as largely transparent, rationalised, finite and simple enough to be reproduced in performance. The possession of what was believed to be a complete and objective body of information about the game set the precedent for control. It partook of both the belief in digital systems as finite and rational and the strategies of modernist states that, through the production of totalising knowledge, established legitimacy and control. Significantly in engaging the game people were also conceived as entering this network of absolute knowledge and were rendered as subjects in terms of these concepts of control.

What interested me was that this appeared to contradict the claims made by a growing body of work concerned with describing the way that technologies associated with the rationalising forces of modernity in fact achieved its opposite – the re-enchantment of modernity (e.g. Pels 2003, Allison 2006). Saler's study of modern fiction, including that of the fantasy genre, for example, argues that the genre combines the rational 'realism' of modernity with the enchanting capacities of fantasy and escapism to produce a distinctly modern form of enchantment (2012) and in her study of machine gamblers in Las Vegas Natasha Dow Schüll claims that the mystifying outcomes produced by the machines acted as a form of enchantment through the access they granted to 'the zone' that enabled the experience of bodily loss (2012).

In contrast to the claims made in these studies, in *World of Warcraft* enchantment was categorised as a form of contingency and those aspects of the game seen to generate it were marginalised. This caused me to consider and problematize the theoretical stance that underpinned these studies which assumed that the modern world existed in some primary state of disenchantment. Again, the evidence

from my fieldwork suggested that this was an oversimplification, fantasy appeared to be a much more ubiquitous part of the lives of London gamers than the strictly 'rational'.

This discovery led me to examine the role of fantasy in English culture from which I develop an argument that for these gamers fantasy had a fundamental role in the development of autonomy that constituted the English value of privacy. And that enchantment was in some sense a more quotidian experience than disenchantment.

Rather than the world being disenchanted, I argue that the enchanted was simply appropriated into the private domain in English culture. Rationality on the other hand was seldom experienced in as fundamental a form as it was in *World of Warcraft* where it offered a novel form of engagement that through its abstract qualities enabled the possibility for collective sociality that precluded the need to reveal personal information while retaining the essential texture of public sociality, that it participated in a highly formalised version of a well-known genre of public friendliness.

1.6. Enter the World of Warcraft

Before describing the structure of the study, it is first necessary to explain what *World of Warcraft* is and provide some historical context for the emergence of the videogame genre. The interest that social scientists have taken in videogames in the past decade stems not just from the growth of multiplayer games, but also because videogames have become a recognisable and popular part of culture, especially in North America, Asia and Europe. The rise of videogames was not a linear evolutionary process. As Campbell-Kelly shows, videogames became hugely popular in the late 70s with *Pong*, *Space Invaders* and the emergence of gaming consoles, computing products dedicated to gaming, rather than general computing (2003), but by 1983 the games industry experienced a crash, largely attributed to the low quality of videogames produced for the various machines available (ibid: 280). It was the Japanese company Nintendo, which developed a console with proprietary control over those games developed for it, which led the recovery and the subsequent development of those by competitors Sega, Sony and Microsoft.

As Campbell-Kelly notes the next game-changer was the release by Sony of its Playstation console in the mid-1990s, which, building on Nintendo's approaches, sought to alter the demographics of videogamers, the more affluent 20-somethings who had grown up with the console games of the mid-80s. Sony reported that 40 million Playstations had been sold globally by 1998. The growth of consoles throughout the late 1990s invariably impacted the sales of games for the other generic platform, the Personal Computer (PC). The PC had been the first mass-market gaming platform and following the crash of the early 80s had become a hobby platform as well as one for commercial releases. The co-incidence of these two sides of the PC was realised in the ground-breaking release *Doom* and its follow-up *Doom II*. Released by id Software in 1993 initially as shareware, the game introduced revolutionary graphics and importantly id also allowed a great deal of modification to the game, following one of the programmer's "hacker ethic" and, utilising the growing access to the Internet at this time, the game also included multi-player modes. By 1995 allegedly 10 million copies of the shareware version of *Doom* had been installed on PCs (Kushner 2003: 196). The *Doom* games were followed by the *Quake* series of games and numerous other PC titles that utilised graphics and design of a similar quality. It was in this environment that Blizzard Entertainment released the real-time strategy (RTS) game, *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* in 1994, which also offered the option of multiplayer gaming.

By the late 1990s videogames had made an impact on mainstream culture, with characters like Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog and Lara Croft becoming household names in North America, Europe and Asia. The commercial success of games series such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty* meant that by the mid-2000s claims were made that the videogames industry was more valuable than the movie industry (e.g. Chaplin and Ruby 2005). Significantly, as Sony had recognised with its release of the Playstation console, the demographics for videogames had broadened significantly. While there has been little recent research into who plays videogames in the UK, the BBC's *Gamer's in the UK* study from 2005 claimed that 59% of 6-65 year olds played videogames, that the average age was 28 and that 26.5 million people in the UK played videogames. Of these 48% identified themselves as "heavy"

players of videogames (from at least once a week up to every day), divided between 27% of whom were male and 21% of whom were female. While data specific to players of *World of Warcraft* in the UK was sparse, an estimate based on 2011 data put at 1 million players[1], the largest number of any of the other European country[2].

World of Warcraft was an MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) developed by Blizzard Entertainment Inc., a Californian videogames developer. It was publicly released in late 2004 and subsequently became the most commercially successful title of the MMO genre, reaching an active subscription base of over 12 million players globally in 2010. While multiplayer games called Multi-User Dungeons/Domains (MUDs) had existed since the late 70s, the first 'graphical MUD' as it was known was *Meridian 59* released in 1996, followed by *Ultima Online* in 1997 and *Everquest* in 1999 the latter of which proved a surprising commercial success. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s Blizzard Entertainment continued to develop well-received titles, two more *Warcraft* games were released in 1996 and 2002 along with two other games series, *Diablo* and *Starcraft,* both of which were commercially and critically successful. The success of *Everquest* paved the way for Blizzard's development of the Warcraft setting into the MMO *World of Warcraft*.

Players purchased the game software (either a box with several DVDs or downloaded from the internet), then paid a subscription fee each month (or variations of) of around £15 until they chose to stop playing. The game was stored as a local file on an individual's computer, but could only be played online via the remote servers. As of writing, five expansions had been released for *World of Warcraft - The Burning Crusade* 2006, *Wrath of the Lich King* 2008, *Cataclysm* 2010, *Mists of Pandaria* 2012 and *Warlors of Draenor* and a sixth, *Legion*, is planned for release in 2016. Each expansion had to be

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[1] http://www.wowwiki.com/WoW_population_by_country
[2] Although it's worth noting that this data was based on numbers of people on *English-speaking* servers and many non-UK European players also played on English-speaking servers.

purchased separately and provided new content, features and changes to the game. The game was also regularly updated through patches that added the same, but were free.

In *World of Warcraft* players chose from one of two factions – 'Alliance' or 'Horde' – from which different 'races' were available, ranging from human and human-like (e.g. elves, dwarves etc.) through to the more monstrous, such as orcs and trolls. Then players could choose from a range of character classes that would determine their abilities, how they would engage in combat with enemies. This included familiar fantasy archetypes such as warrior, priest, druid, rogue, and mage. Players had fairly limited scope in terms of customising their characters, being given a much smaller range of options than was the case for *Second Life*, or single-player role-playing games like *Skyrim*. A player's character began at level 1 and possessed a few very basic items (weapons, armour), 'gear' necessary to play and a small number of abilities. The aim was to progress through gaining experience points, mostly from killing enemies, and exploring. At certain experience point thresholds a character would advance a level. As of writing the current maximum level was 100. One of the principle means of acquiring experience points was through 'quests' – these were challenges give out by in-game characters (NPCs [Non-Player Characters]) often using a formula such as 'kill 10 boars' or 'acquire 5 scorpion stingers'. Upon completion of these quests a character would receive experience points. At the same time as 'levelling' a player would be able to acquire new and improved items of gear and new abilities. The former could be recovered from the bodies of defeated enemies, received as quest rewards alongside experience points or bought from other players. While levelling players had the option to form groups with other players, often to complete more difficult content that had been designed for groups of players – typically '5-man dungeons'. These dungeons rewarded players with more experience points and the opportunity for better gear and also, importantly, were one of the key means by which new players were socialised into game norms.

All this took place in the setting of 'Azeroth', a varied and graphically stunning world populated by monsters ranging from wolves, to undead, dragons and demons. This setting had a dense backstory,

its own history referred to as the 'lore', 'cultures', cosmology and an unfolding narrative. For new players this world could appear vast and incomprehensible, but to experienced players the majority of the world faded into the background outside of those few locations that were considered important at given points of time. The game world was replicated across servers known as 'Realms' which divided up the game's population. It was not possible in terms of computing power and network infrastructure to host all players on a single server. There were several different types of realm – the two most common were Player vs Environment (PvE) and Player vs Player (PvP), the latter distinguished from the former by the capacity for players of different factions to be able to attack each other. There were also Role-Playing (RP) realms, which were PvE realms where players could 'role-play' their characters and rules existed to better enable this, such as naming restrictions. The final realm type was the Role-Playing Player vs Player (RP PvP) realm which amalgamated the rules of the RP and PvP realms. It was the latter type of realm that Helkpo existed on, although many guild members had characters on other realms. Realms also allowed for language localisation so there were French speaking, German speaking and Polish speaking realms, for example. Although Blizzard never made server capacity public, estimates suggested that at maximum capacity a server could host several thousand concurrent players.

At maximum level players could participate in 'raids'. Raid dungeons were much more difficult pieces of content that often required a great deal of organisation and planning as well as the right mix of character classes and certain level of gear. The rewards for successfully defeating enemy 'bosses' in raid dungeons were the most powerful items of gear, referred to as 'epics'. During my fieldwork raid dungeons existed for groups of 10 and 25 players. Raid dungeons might take many hours over several evenings a week to complete and required a great deal of attention, fast reflexes and a clear understanding of a character's role. Although 'easier' versions of raids were made available in 2011, in most cases it was necessary for a player to be a member of a 'guild' to participate in this kind of content.

Guilds were important institutions in *World of Warcraft*. Guilds were player-created organisations that had access to shared resources and 'perks'. Guilds took many forms, but were generally conceived as falling into two types - 'hard-core' and 'casual' - which comprised certain types of players. The former were typically hierarchical and highly formal, and ranks such as guild 'leader' and 'officers' were taken seriously. These guilds had high expectations regarding the level of commitment of their members. The latter were generally seen as groups of friends and were much more informal with lower expectations of the commitment of members. The reality was less clear cut. The guild in this study, Helkpo, attempted to combine elements of both.

Players could also participate in Player vs Player (PvP) activities, which as the name suggests, was where the enemies were not programmed, but other players. Other activities for players included gaining achievements, collecting resources like herbs or ores as well as exploring. Every player I knew had at least one 'alt' (alternative character) most had many, that they might play if they became temporarily bored with the current 'main' character. While there were many different activities in *World of Warcraft* it remained a highly structured game with distinct limitations in terms of what could be done with the available affordances, especially for experienced players. Although at its inception and for the first couple of years of its existence raiding was a niche activity, over the years Blizzard designed this feature of the game to be more accessible and as it did so other in-game activities became secondary to this. I apply the term 'interpretive flexibility', developed by Pinch and Bijker (2012) to explain how in the early days of a new technology there is no dominant interpretation of its meaning and form, to describe this early phase which by the time of my fieldwork had reached a period of 'closure' and stability. This change in design approach had a fundamental impact on the expectations and experiences of the game for the players in this study, and the player base more generally.

Gear (usually weapons and armour) was one of the motivating reasons for undertaking raids and PvP and generally the more powerful the enemy, the better the gear. Gear was a visible indicator in-game

that a player had overcome an encounter and was associated with status and performative competence. The most sought after gear in the game was usually that which was acquired by defeating raid 'bosses', as noted above. Gear was not a 'one size fits all' product, different character classes required different kinds of gear to enhance their performance. This meant that defeating a raid boss did not guarantee that a player would acquire the gear they desired, there was always an element of chance involved. The way this worked was that the items each boss 'dropped' would be just a few of the total number of possible items and each boss dropped different types of gear for different kinds of character classes. What this meant in reality was that a player, as part of a raid group, might defeat the same raid boss numerous times in order to acquire the item they desired. In most cases a raid boss could only be defeated once a week (raid dungeons were 're-set' on a weekly basis) and therefore an unlucky player might wait several months before acquiring the item they wanted.

One of the key reasons given for *World of Warcraft*'s popularity and commercial success was its 'accessibility' compared to, at the time of its release, the other major MMOs on the market. For example it was seen to be much easier to complete content without teaming up with other players and the penalties for the death of a character were a great deal less harsh than they were for *Everquest* or *Ultima Online*. Accessibility did not just refer to design however. The hardware requirements for the game were also much lower. *World of Warcraft* was relatively graphically unsophisticated for a 'Triple A' videogame, for example the character models and skins were basic and strived less to look 'naturalistic', described sometimes as 'cartoony'. This reduced the need for high levels of processing power and meant that it could be played on relatively inexpensive or old computers.

Finally it will become apparent throughout this study that *World of Warcraft* changed over the years. One Guardian journalist compared it to a cathedral, describing it as a:

> "medieval cathedral. And a magnificent one: it is the Chartres of the video-game world. Like
> a cathedral, it is a supreme work of art that is, on a brick-by-brick basis, the creation of
> hundreds of artisans and craftsmen, many of whom will be long gone by the time it comes to

completion; indeed, since *WoW* is in a state of permanent expansion, it may not ever be "complete". All those programmers are the modern-day equivalent of stonemasons, foundation-diggers and structural engineers."[3]

While the mechanics of the game remained fundamentally the same and this contributed to the sense of continuity that players experienced, the design changes increasingly emphasised accessibility by opening up varying forms of difficulty and alternative means to acquire 'epic' gear. It will become evident however that these changes contributed to a general shift in the forms of sociality the game was seen to produce.

1.7. Structure of the Chapters

Chapter 2 sets the scene for the study through the examination of the way players imagined the game's architecture to be a transparent and therefore knowable 'system'. It addresses this in the opening sections through contrasting ethnographic experiences of *World of Warcraft* and a pen and paper roleplaying game. The latter legitimated player improvisation and spontaneous acts in response to an unpredictable and, in this instance, opaque system. The former framed these kinds of acts as deeply problematic in their interaction with a system that was conceived as knowable. Players were able to access resources that provided detailed descriptions of mechanics in the game that often explained how to optimise performance in the game and rather than being viewed as optional, by the time of my fieldwork they were conceived as an essential part of the game and successful performance in it. While these resources usually had at best only an indexical relationship with the actual architecture of the game, some of which was highly opaque, the aesthetic presentation of this information rendered it 'objective' in the eyes of players and rather than simply being a 'representation' of the architecture, it was viewed as *the* architecture. The assumed transparency of *World of Warcraft*'s architecture as well as the more directional design Blizzard instigated from 2008 framed the normative expectations for performance. 'Architectural rules' were 'naturalised' and

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[3] http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2009/nov/29/world-of-warcraft-sam-leith

'social rules', conceived as legitimate extensions of the former, set limits on what was considered appropriate performance. This chapter explores how these rules shaped performance in raid encounters through 'strategy' and the way players created their interfaces through recourse to aesthetic notions of transparency that reflected the game's architecture.

In Chapter 3 these features of the 'game culture' that emerged in *World of Warcraft* are considered through the frame of the cultural context of Englishness. For my informants, *World of Warcraft* was deeply entwined with the social networks they were already entangled in as well as being capable of producing new connections. While informal types of sociality such as friendship may be glossed as exclusively positive, using Simmel's theories on disclosure and concealment in relationships I argue that social relations were always based around the tensions of knowledge and concealment, proximity and distance. No matter how close and intimate a relationship was, there remained things those involved did not know about each other. These tensions had specific significance for those in my study for two reasons. The first was that they were part of expansive and attenuated social networks and as such a large proportion of their relationships were notably 'weak' and even those with whom an individual shared strong social ties could be socially absent. These relationships were constructed around what I term 'knowing' – partial and indeterminate types of information about others. While this was not fundamentally a problem, the potential for it to be so was compounded by the force that was the dualism of English sociality which operated on a sharp distinction between a public domain of surface friendliness against which existed a fiercely held private domain of autonomy.

The exacerbated role of 'knowing' meant that this duality was often difficult to mark out in an explicit way without contradicting its own logic. *World of Warcraft* appeared to offer a resolution to this tension. In entering the game, people became 'players' and as such were subject to the elaborations of the game's architectural system. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, the unpredictable qualities attributed to players were deemed problematic and within the domain of the game could be legitimately censured and controlled. In this way people were subject to novel forms of social and technological

accountability that replaced the more contingent form of 'knowing' with what were viewed as objective 'knowledge'. A further consequence of this was that information considered 'private' was framed as inappropriate because it had the potential to disrupt performance. At the same time the social expansiveness enabled by the game's architecture was seen to legitimise it as a space of public sociality in which a minimal of personal information was required because the game's architecture was seen to produce the most significant knowledge about individuals in the game. In this way it seemed to be a perfect architecture of Englishness. This coincidence of forms is explained using Sahlins' notion of the 'event' - a moment where the synchrony of structure, systems of cultural meaning coincide with the contingencies of history (1985).

Chapter 4 explores less well trod territory for the subject matter of MMOs like *World of Warcraft* - the fantasy genre that it was so evidently a part of. Although it might have been assumed that players of *World of Warcraft* were engaged with the genre, this was not borne out in public domains, including within the game itself. Fantasy was almost exclusively restricted to private domains and engagement with it was done so in a solitary fashion. Given the emphasis on the imagination, and the conventional association that exists for fantasy and the imagination, the chapter begins with an examination of the distinction Arjun Appadurai draws between the collective 'imagination' and the individualistic concept of 'fantasy' as part of his claim that, under the conditions of modernity, the imagination has become an everyday resource for action. From there the argument progresses in two related directions. The first is that, perhaps unsurprisingly people committed to the fantasy genre as a means to engage with and generate 'enchantment'. However contra the tendency for academic discussions of modern enchantment as exceptional, it turned out that fantasy, and the enchantments it generated was an entirely quotidian experience deeply rooted in traditions of Englishness and the cultivation of privacy and autonomy. The other strand of the argument is concerned with the historical form of the fantasy genre and the kinds of social and imaginative possibilities it shaped. The most popular expression of the genre was characterised by its excessive volume and highly complex and open-ended content. The effect of this was to make consumers of the fantasy genre more susceptible to 'geekiness' through the

possession of obscure knowledge that worked against the establishment of relationships or other collective activities. This potential for 'geekiness' meant that it always had the potential to create social awkwardness, an alarming possibility in the logic of English sociality. The marginalised treatment of fantasy in *World of Warcraft* by both players and, to some degree, the developers was intentional in as much as it had the capacity to undermine the expansive sociality and public status cultivated in *World of Warcraft*. In contrast, then, with the obscure and indeterminate forms of knowledge fantasy affected, the finite and legible system of practical knowledge embodied in the architectural system of the game was seen to be a more tangible and productive technology of the imagination, a rare opportunity to engage with the 'rational'.

In the penultimate chapter, the study shifts to consider how the developers, Blizzard, conceptualised its governing role through a series of explorations of the roles of control, certainty and contingency. The debate is framed by the development and commercial imperatives of Blizzard that emerged over the course of *World of Warcraft*'s development, the broad aim of which was to make the relatively cost-efficient 'end-game' content more accessible to the game's wide player-base. The first account considers the relationship between control and certainty, arguing that the latter is concerned with the predictability of outcomes leaving room for contingency within processes. It draws contrasts between *World of Warcraft* and Linden Labs' *Second Life* platform, suggesting that while the latter was concerned with the indeterminate outcomes of complex systems, the former was more concerned with the contingent within systems and how it could be calibrated to produce some sense of certainty. From here it looks at a concrete example of this in Blizzard's attempts to 're-code' sociality in the game to eliminate or reduce those elements of social interaction that might discourage players from end-game activities. It did so by precluding player agency from points in this process, but cleverly deflected intentionality toward an entity – stochastic chance – that was deemed as possessing none of the fallibilities possessed by people. The next section explores the relationship Blizzard had with players which acknowledges the way that the empowerment of player-activism was replaced by an aesthetic

of player 'power' within the more easily controlled system of the game. It also explores how designers were conceived as observing the dual identity of players in order to reduce forms of contingency, a discourse that circled round the incommensurable concept of fun, the polysemy of which could be used to legitimate design choices. Finally it considers the central significance of design change and how this ideological narrative combined the twin concepts of 'structure' and 'history' to generate a contradictory sense of certainty that players would get 'more of the same', but the 'same' would be improved. A sense of continuity was legitimised through the same aesthetic formalisms that player-produced resources employed that rendered it a part of a transparent and knowable 'system'.

The concluding chapter reviews the arguments pursued in the previous chapters concerning the issues of contingency, control and certainty. It suggests that in the same way that control may effectively produce the conditions for indeterminacy, so contingency may unintentionally create the conditions for forms of control. I begin with an overview of the arguments presented in each chapter and use them to discuss the ways that control could be accomplished through the legitimacy accorded the game's 'system' and consider how forms designed for contingency may unintentionally create sites for control.

In the second section I consider the way that games may be reconsidered as sites of control through reconsideration of the notions of 'cheating' and what digital games have become in the 21st century.

The third section is devoted to the implications of control in games for processual anthropology considering the relationship between history and structure and performative and prescriptive modes of cultural response to contingent events.

1.8. Methodology

Although the subject of my study was a digital multiplayer game, the aim of the study was to apply a traditional anthropological approach through participant observation which I carried out between 2011 and 2014 followed by a second period of fieldwork for around 6 months in 2015. Significantly,

unlike studies of MMOs or 'virtual worlds' that restricted themselves to the digital domain (e.g. Boellstorff 2008, Nardi 2010, Chen 2012) I wanted to include at least as much fieldwork in more conventional physical sites. This is not to diminish the methodological rationale of ethnographies that adopt this approach or to suggest that 'game cultures' are not of value in and of themselves as subjects for ethnographic engagement (e.g. Boellstorff et al 2012), indeed Chapter 2 shows how significant the 'game culture' of *World of Warcraft* was for the specific cultural encounters of my physical field site. I was fortunate that a significant number of players in the guild, 'Helkpo', that I was a part of were based in London which made the physical side of my fieldwork practical. That the membership of *World of Warcraft* guilds often had close geographic overlap with localised networks of people appears to have been a distinction that was markedly different to the situations elaborated by Taylor (2006b), Nardi (2010) and Chen (2012) in the United States that seemed to show a much wider geographic dispersal. Besides the guild I studied that had a predominant London and to some extent south-eastern UK membership, I also encountered guilds made up form networks in Leighton Buzzard and in the south of Cumbria.

My principal 'digital' field site was spread across two English-speaking RP-PVP servers in *World of Warcraft* that the guild I focussed my study on were based. This was supplemented by several minor digital field sites in competitor MMOs *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Guild Wars 2* where members of Helkpo set up guilds with the same name, and *Minecraft* that for a time had its own guild server. Alongside these more obvious digital 'worlds' a key site on which I spent a great deal of time was the guild forum. The scholarly literature on MMOs has often alluded to the value of these 'peripheral' digital spaces but I feel they have rarely done them justice, and it was my hope that I would be able to rectify that issue in my study. The guild forum was '*World of Warcraft* away from *World of Warcraft*' to adapt the English phrase 'home away from home'. Although the technical specifications were modest by the standards of most contemporary 'AAA' videogame titles, *World of Warcraft* still required a fairly powerful PC or laptop and although smartphone apps enabled people who owned one to access some of the functions of the game remotely, they were very limited in scope. The guild

forum by contrast was accessible through a web browser and because it was not a mainstream social media website like Facebook it was easily accessed from people's places of work. The website was specifically designed with this in mind. It had two aesthetic looks, the default was a bright pink pastiche of the Japanese character 'Hello Kitty', but there was also a more sober 'grey' version of the site designed for work place discretion. The guild forum was a highly active place where the guild's in-game and sometimes out-of-game activities were organised, potential recruits could submit applications to join and there was space for the discussion of non-game related topics. Although the forum didn't allow for actual 'real-time' interaction between users as it used a more traditional 'bulletin board' architecture, it still allowed for a relatively smooth flow of conversation. The architecture also seemed to encourage users to post sometimes quite long and well thought out posts that would have been less likely through other more imminent media including face-to-face conversation. The guild forum also functioned as a more 'private' domain than the game world and included a private messaging feature for more personal exchanges, including 'investigative' procedures that guild leaders occasionally undertook when controversy struck. The other site that also had great significance was the VoIP software 'Ventrilo', usually referred to as 'Vent'. The original function of this was to enable real-time voice communication between players during raids where other communicative media, such as text was considered too slow and distracting. But the software was also used by some players as a place to hang out and chat even when not raiding and even for other games including single-player games. The software also allowed for the creation of numerous channels, some of which were given over to exclusively dyadic and private communications.

My expectation was that I would spend half of my fieldwork time in these digital domains, but because *World of Warcraft* was played in an almost 'seasonal' fashion, with player and active guild member numbers increasing in response to new content, especially new expansions, and then gradually declining until the next batch of content, there were occasions when there was virtually no activity in the game, so without putting a number on it, I actually spent more time in my physical field sites. My physical field site was London, in the southeast of the United Kingdom so I shared the same geographic

location as the people in my study. However London is a large – Greater London exceeds 600 square miles - and densely populated city – estimated to have a population of over 8.5 million – and the guild members were spread widely across it. So unlike smaller field sites where the anthropologist might encounter many of their informants in the same day, often I spent time with people in one on one situations. However there were also regular social events at pubs and clubs and sometimes house parties, gigs and cinema events I attended as well as annual guild 'meet-ups'. Although most people lamented that they no longer went clubbing as often as they did when they were younger, there was still at least one regular monthly club night several guild members attended that I was present at.

Unlike many ethnographies of MMOs or virtual worlds which were undertaken by scholars with little familiarity with the digital spaces they studied (e.g. Markham 1998, Pearce 2009, Nardi 2010) I was fortunate enough to be quite familiar with *World of Warcraft*. I began playing the game in 2006 for the purposes of a commercial research project I was involved in and so I was a member of an established guild and had established positive relationships with many of its core members. Although I had only met a small number of them outside of the game and the relationships I had established were not intimate friendships, this relatively shallow level of familiarity did grant me more trust than might otherwise have been the case and this made it far simpler for me to develop these relationships further as part of my fieldwork so I could get to know people in much greater depth. This proved to be especially important given my requests to spend time with them in their homes as well as in public spaces. So although I officially started my fieldwork in 2011, by the time I finished my second period of fieldwork in 2015 I had almost 9 years' of engagement with some of the people in the game which provided me with a unique long-term perspective that few previous ethnographic studies of *World of Warcraft* had. This enabled me to identify a period of 'interpretive flexibility' and the subsequent stage of closure and stability that previous studies, mostly from the first three of four years of the game, had not experienced in as definitive a form.

Because of the long-term duration of my fieldwork I became familiar with the wide networks of which these people were a part and how they were constantly expanding and how this affected the strengths of relationships between friends. Because most people lived in shared flats or houses, even when visiting an individual I would invariably encounter the people with whom they lived. These unexpected encounters are considered a key part of the ethnographic experience, so when, quite by chance, I became friendly with people who were unconnected to my '*World of Warcraft*' network but who invited me to be participant observer in the pen and paper roleplaying games, I felt that would also be of value to my study. This 'pen and paper roleplaying' group not only enabled me to experience an entirely different sort of game, it also enabled me to observe another socially expansive network and note the similarities with that of the '*World of Warcraft*' group which proved to be an invaluable resource for the generalisations I have made throughout this study. Importantly it also allowed me to observe the degree to which groups that would be considered 'alternative' and somewhat marginal to the mainstream, a term that invariably had less meaning in the cosmopolitan city of London, still reproduced the enduring dualism of English sociality. This 'alternative' expression of cultural capital will be explored in more depth in Chapter 3. Here it's worth stating that expectations that these people were anti-social or solitary couldn't have been further from the truth. As noted above they were deeply implicated in wide networks of friends and other informal ties and spent a significant amount of time in public spaces where English sociality was practiced in a more open and friendly manner. If I were asked to hypothesise I might suggest this level of sociality was a consequence of the generally more populous and open cosmopolitanism of London, however the fact that similar, albeit smaller, networks were evident in other parts of the UK suggests that this is not the case. It may simply be that, as many journalists in the UK have claimed, interests at one time regarded as 'geeky' or 'nerdy' have become more mainstream. Although, as Chapter 4 will demonstrate, there remained interests that were marginalised and restricted to more solitary practices.

It's difficult to enumerate the total number of people who were a part of my ethnography in an overall sense, as numerous guild members came and went during the three years of my fieldwork, but

according to my tally there was over this period in excess of 150 guild members in total and in my encounters with two social networks I became familiar with, according to my list at least 90 people. However of my '*World of Warcraft* group', twenty seven became my principal informants with whom I established strong relationships beyond the game, and of my pen and paper group I established strong relationships with eleven people. I became a familiar presence in their homes and in their social groups and followed their lives for 6 months for ten of my *World of Warcraft* informants and for three years for the other twenty eight informants. Virtually all of my principal informants were British born, the exception being a woman from my 'pen and paper roleplaying' group who had grown up in Norway, but had spent the last six to ten years living between London and Norway. Virtually all were white, apart from one of my '*World of Warcraft* group' informants who was a second generation immigrant from Pakistan. The majority of my '*World of Warcraft* group' were from what would be termed working class backgrounds and tended to have lower educational achievements and aspirations. My 'pen and paper roleplaying group' had noticeably more middle class backgrounds and were engaged in the more academically oriented art world. Of my twenty seven *World of Warcraft* participants, twenty were male and seven were female, which fits well with estimates that approximately 16% of *World of Warcraft* players were female[4]. The age range spanned 23 to 37 with most being in the late 20s, early 30s when I began my fieldwork. Again this is in line with the typical age of *World of Warcraft* players based one existing data. These people lived in a variety of different domestic situations. The majority lived in flat shares with friends of a similar age, although several also lived with their parents for at least some of the time during my fieldwork. The majority worked full-time although a small number (4) were students for at least some of the time during my fieldwork. Of these twenty seven people, fourteen of them were part of a social network and has established relationships prior to playing *World of Warcraft* together. Four of these friendships went back as far as the mid-1990s and were formed on the alternative metal club scene in London at that time. Of my eleven pen and paper roleplaying game informants, seven were female and four were male, a highly

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[4] http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001369.php

unusual ratio for a game conventionally strongly associated with masculine pursuits. The age range for these informants was generally lower than that of the *World of Warcraft* informants, ranging between 25 and 28. These people lived in similar circumstances, the majority in flat- or house-shares. I supplemented my participant observation with 48 semi-formal interviews with members of my *World of Warcraft* guild that included overseas members from countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Romania and Iceland, that established their backgrounds, living conditions, employment, interests and outlooks towards the game and their interests more broadly. I also combined this with a survey I had carried out for commercial purposes in 2008 with 60 guild members.

"This is WoW, there's really no opportunity to do anything "great" in a fight, because the combat is too limited for that. All that's left to worry about is making as few mistakes as possible, so that's all I have to obsess over. Bit depressing really, this game won't ever give you a chance to do something that makes you feel like you fucking rock. You can never impress, you can only fail slightly less often"

Effok, Helkpo

2.1. World of Warcraft

It's around 5.30pm on a typical early August afternoon in London in 2009. The sun is still high in the sky and the air is dusty and close, but I don't notice, the blinds to my left are pulled almost shut and my eyes are focused on the computer screen before me. I've just logged onto *World of Warcraft* and in 25 minutes I will be entering Ulduar, a 'Titan city' converted into a prison to 'permanently confine the old god of death, Yogg-Saron', with nine other people who, like me will be sat in their homes in front of their computer monitors. Of these, eight are located in the UK, mainly in and around London, and one is Leuven in Belgium. At this moment in time, however, who or what built Ulduar and who or what is currently imprisoned there are the last things on my mind.

My principal concern is to ensure that I am adequately prepared for the evening's activities. There are two things I must bring with me, 'flasks' and 'buff food'. The term 'buff' refers to mechanics in the game that increase statistics (mechanics that reduce statistics are called 'debuffs'). Both of these in-game items are referred to as 'consumables' that is, you can only use them once, and they will both increase some of my character's most important statistics and should help me optimise my performance. The 'buff food' is simple enough for me to acquire as my character can cook and fish and the buff food is 'Blackened Dragonfin' which will add 40 points to my Agility and 40 points to my

Stamina. I have a few left over from my previous evening of raiding, but I always bring more as you never know when they might be needed (and who else in the raid might need one). So I prepare 30, which takes me less than a few minutes. The flasks I can't produce myself as my character doesn't have the necessary 'alchemy' skill, so I need to go to the Auction House to purchase some made by other players. I normally purchase 4 of these as each flask lasts for an hour and this is usually the maximum duration of an evening's raid. We start at 6pm and finish at 10pm. Each flask costs around 12 gold (the in-game currency) to instantly purchase, rather than bidding and waiting to see if a bid has been successful, which could take a day or two. So I purchase them, collect them from the 'mailbox' outside the auction house, then summon my flying mount a 'purple windrider' (imagine a lion with the wings of a bat) and fly north across the snowy mountains of Storm Peaks, the zone in the game where Ulduar is located.

Other members of the guild appear online – their presence announced to me in the chat channel on the bottom left of my screen. Brief greetings are shared – 'hi', 'evening', 'hello' – no doubt they're as focused on preparation as I am. All of this is quite routine. I don't even notice that the location where I carried out these activities is a city floating above a violet forest. I barely notice the landscape that unfurls beneath my character on screen that inspired so much awe when I first encountered it. Some of this lack of interest may be attributed to the number of times I've made this journey – familiarity can breed indifference – but in truth it is probably that there are simply more important things to consider.

The raid leader logs on with 20 minutes to go and a graphic image appears in the middle of my screen 'Jewlz has invited you to join a group' it tells me. I have the option to 'accept' or 'decline'. I accept. I hear a drum roll sound effect through my headphones and a bar appears on the left side of my screen with four names in it besides my own, some of my fellow raiders for the evening. As I approach my destination four more names appear. Meaning that we are waiting for just one more person. I 'tab' out of *World of Warcraft*, minimising the game application and go to the guild website where there is

a list of tonight's raid participants to view who we are waiting for. I see that it's not somebody who normally runs late, so I assume they will log on before raid start time. I also open Ventrilo, a piece of VoiP (Voice over Internet Protocol) software run outside of *WoW* that allows the raid to talk to one another. After several minutes I arrive at Ulduar, a large cathedral-like building sitting atop a snow-covered outcrop. Beneath me I can see the 'summoning stone', an obelisk marked by a glowing rune that allows two players in the same group to teleport any other group members to the stone almost instantly. On this particular occasion I can see a group of eight or nine players from the opposing faction, the 'Alliance'. So rather than landing I remain high above them well out of their range, as it's not unusual for players waiting outside raids to attack and kill players of the opposing faction. Death is little more than an inconvenience in *WoW*, but it's an inconvenience I'd rather avoid. I also notice a guild member hovering on his flying mount higher still than I am. I click on him using my mouse cursor and type '/wave' in the chatbox, the text 'you wave at Bushe' appears beneath the command. Bushe does not acknowledge my greeting, he's probably not tabbed into *WoW*, maybe he's getting something to drink – this player has a reputation for getting drunk whilst raiding.

Twenty minutes later we are wait on a ramp overlooking a colossal courtyard. The courtyard is empty, the previous evening it had been full of tanks and siege engines but it housed a boss we defeated that night. We need to make our way through Ulduar to the remaining bosses but we are still waiting on one more player, Mouser, to join our group. The raid leader, Jewlz, suggests that, if we haven't done so already, we might read up on one of the bosses we are going to try this evening as tonight we are going to attempt it on 'hard' mode. I have glanced at the guide but feel that I should take some time to have a proper look so I tab out of *WoW* again and find the 'Tankspot' video for Hodir 'hard mode'. I'm a few minutes into the video and trying to comprehend it all when Ventrilo announces that Mouser has 'joined the conversation'. Jewlz announces that we are ready to start and asks that we all tab back in to *WoW*.

The guild has been raiding in Ulduar for almost four months at this point in time, so most of the bosses are 'on farm', that means that they are relatively easy to defeat, in most cases we will do so on our first attempt – what is termed 'one-shotting', and this is a good thing, it guarantees that we will get gear drops and waste as little time as possible on them. Before we get to Hodir we defeat several bosses, Ignius the Furnace Master and Razorscale, both of whom are one-shotted. These are considered easy encounters. Mimiron and Thorim take three attempts each and Auriya is defeated first time. All these bosses drop 'loot', items like armour and weapons that improve our characters. A great deal of the items the bosses drop we already have. A ring I have my eye on from Razorscale doesn't drop, frustratingly. But one of the players who hasn't raided as often as the others acquires a wand from Auriya. Then we come to Hodir.

Everyone in the raid has been here before, some even remember the first time we encountered him. The room is a roughly rectangular cavern with a grey patterned floor, the walls are sheer verticals of ice. At the end of the room, barring the exit is Hodir himself - a huge, blue skinned giant with an elaborately plaited blond beard, a disproportionately large mace and a glowing skull-shaped belt buckle. His fearsome visage is not the main concern however. Raid leader Jewlz is not the kind of person who minces his words. "We're probably not going to do this tonight, but we're going to try" he explains "but we will probably succeed next time we do it". He then proceeds to explain the strategy we need to adhere to. I had experienced Jewlz' pep talks and strategy explanations on many prior occasions. He had a fairly simple approach, which was to repeat a boss strategy again and again until it was perfected. This was possible because raid boss encounters in *World of Warcraft* were, as we will see, fairly predictable. The key to dealing with them was not so much how to respond to unpredictable game mechanics, but first to learn know how to respond to specific mechanics, then learn how to respond to several of these mechanics occurring at the same time or in quick succession whilst continuing to perform a character class role.

Hodir proved to be a particularly tricky encounter for the guild for a number of reasons. Firstly there were four Non-Player Characters (NPCs) in the room whose role it was to aid us by providing extra damage, healing and most importantly buffs that would increase the damage we did. During the encounter they become frozen and incapacitated requiring players to attack the ice they are held in to break them free. It is important that they are free as without their help the encounter is impossible to defeat. Secondly, all players are affected by a 'debuff' that increases in damage as long as a player stands still – in order to remove the 'debuff' a player has to move. During the encounter Hodir will freeze a player, preventing movement and causing the debuff to kill them. Other players with 'dispel' abilities need to look out for this and dispel it as soon as possible. Thirdly, icicles fall from the ceiling at points throughout the encounter doing a great deal of damage to a player caught beneath them; a second or two before they strike a white circle appears on the floor as a warning to players to move away. Fourthly at various points during the encounter Hodir causes damage to every single player in the encounter, requiring players responsible for healing to focus their attention on every player in the group. And finally at various points several large icicles fall from the ceiling, inflicting huge amounts of damage on any players caught beneath them. However, once the icicles have shattered they leave behind a pile of snow and players need to very quickly get onto these piles or they will be frozen in ice and then they need to be freed by other players which reduces the damage they will do to Hodir. Players need to be aware of all these elements of the encounter as well as using their abilities to maximise their damage, healing etc. In 'hard mode' the only difference is that Hodir needs to be defeated in less than 6 minutes. It's what is termed a 'DPS race' – that is players must maximise the damage they do in as short a time as possible.

Jewlz's explanation of these mechanics to the raid at times takes on a patronising tone, rather like how a primary school teacher might talk to their class. Not everybody is comfortable with his style of explanation, and on occasion people took issue with his manner but more often than not his approach seemed to get the job done and this was usually the priority. "The most important thing is to stand next to the big white circles, but *don't*" he emphasises "stand in them until the icicles have shattered

or *you will die*! Oh, and DPS the shit out of Hodir" he finishes. "Does everyone understand? Is anything not clear? When we wipe we do it again until we get it right". There are affirmative murmurs over Ventrilo. "Good, let's get buffed up and then we can get started". Although I comprehend everything Jewlz tells us, I have done this long enough to know that following these guidelines in practice takes, well, practice.

My headphones are silent apart from the 'munching' sound effect the game produces when players are eating food. Orange text appears in my chat channel "[Raid Leader] [Jewlz]: No Flask (2): Jossti, Bushe, [Raid Leader] [Jewlz]: No Food (1): Jossti". Jewlz uses an addon that automatically checks which players are not properly buffed for raiding. "Come on, everybody needs to have buff food and flasks for this one" Jewlz tells those the software has identified. Jossti apologises, explaining that she hasn't done this for a while. About 20 seconds later he checks again and this time everyone is properly buffed. A drum roll sound effect fills my ears and a graphic image appears in the middle of my screen that says 'Jewlz has initiated a ready check. Are you ready?' Beneath the text are two buttons; yes' and 'no', I click 'yes'. On the bar on the left hand side of my screen that shows the names of the other raiders 'tick' symbols appear one by one, informing all members of the group who is and who is not ready. Everybody is 'ready'. "Okay, good" Jewlz says in response. More words flash across the middle of my screen – a countdown timer: 'Tharee, Thoo, Hwun' ('three, two, one'). And the encounter begins.

Our first attempt at Hodir is over in a little more than two minutes. One of our healers, Hines, is first to die, he's concentrating on healing the raid and forgets to move so the cumulative damage from the debuff is too high. We are one healer down so the next player to go down is one of our tanks. Four more of the damage dealers go down to the raid-wide damage attack, including my character. We've lost half of the raid group within one minute. The remaining healers resurrect who they can, but at just over the minute mark we lose our second tank and after a valiant but pointless 30 seconds the encounter is a 'wipe', that is we all died.

One by one our characters appear, 'resurrected' at the entrance to Ulduar from where we make our way back inside and return to Hodir's cavern. As we 'buff up' in preparation for our second attempt, Jewlz dissects our performance and analyses what killed us in our first attempt. He sees that Hines was killed because he didn't remove his debuff by moving and reminds us all how crucial it is that we avoid standing still for too long. We last a little longer in our second attempt this time we almost make it to 90 seconds before Jossti, one of our healers is killed. She failed to get on the pile of snow in time and was frozen in place where the stacking debuff killed her. Around 30 seconds later Bushe is killed the same way and we 'wipe' at just over 2 minutes and 20 seconds. Before our third attempt Jewlz checks the damage we are doing and thinks that if we can all just stay alive we can do enough damage to Hodir to successfully achieve the kill on hard mode. There is less chat over Ventrilo now as the group, but Jewlz' encouraging words seem to inspire some enthusiasm. We rebuff quickly, and begin attempt three. The encounter lasts a whole 3 minutes 20 seconds this time, but this is only because Hines watches from the side-lines whilst Hodir finishes off the for NPCs who fight on besides our corpses.

It's our fourth attempt and there is only 15 minutes of raid time remaining. Jewlz asks us is if we have time to play beyond the end of official raid time. There is enough collective enthusiasm amongst the group to do so. Our fourth attempt is slightly better than our third attempt, only because more players made it past the two minute mark before being killed. We ready ourselves for our fifth try. "Just remember to keep moving and not to step onto the white circles until after the icicles have hit the floor" Jewlz reminds us, "it's that simple". Although Bushe is killed early on the remaining nine players manage to stay alive for three minutes, but this means that we can't get the hardmode victory we want so Jewlz orders us to 'wipe' – that is purposefully allow our characters to die. It is now our sixth attempt, and it is clear as we cross the two minute mark without a single death that we have learned from our failures. Everyone remembers to keep moving so the debuff does not stack, movement beside and then onto the snow piles is efficient, and because all of our healers are alive the raid-wide damage is properly dealt with. A cheer goes up as at 2 minutes 50 seconds Hodir's profile graphic

transforms from the red of an enemy target to the green of a friendly target signalling our success. Jewlz congratulates us on our success in his casual manner before opening the hard mode casket at the back of the cavern to see what loot we have acquired. Following the raid Hines posts a video of our successful encounter with Hodir on Youtube and posts a link to the forum at around 3.30 in the morning. The video gets a few positive responses from the players who raided that evening. Jewlz, however, points out that having analysed the video there were too many occasions where players were standing next to, rather than in, mechanics that would have buffed them. We were successful, we were good, but we were not perfect.

I will discuss that evening's activities in more detail shortly, but before I do so, I want to describe another evening of gaming that was noticeably different.

2.2. Dungeon Crawl Classics

It's a cold January evening in 2014, just after 6pm. It's already dark outside and I'm with Carl in his kitchen waiting for three more people to arrive. Tonight I'm playing a game called *Dungeon Crawl Classics* or *DCC*. *DCC* is a pen and paper roleplaying game and is noticeably different to *World of Warcraft* in this respect. It requires a table big enough to fit five people around it rather than one table with a computer, which is why Carl offered to host as he was one of the few people who possessed a table large enough to comfortably seat that number of people. The most obvious difference is that *DCC* is entirely 'analogue'. The other three people we're waiting for are Alice, Evan and Will. Will is the 'Game Master' (GM) or in the parlance of *DCC* the 'judge' and he will bring with him a thick hardback book containing over 400 pages of rules, a bag full of polyhedral dice (the dice with fewest facets has four sides, the one with the most facets has twenty-five), pencils and erasers and a folder full of paper including an adventure, maps, random generation tables and character sheets. This group has been together for almost two years at this point and the atmosphere is relaxed. Carl and I chat casually about the things we've been up to over Christmas. The kitchen table is laden with food – bread, cheese, crisps, pre-cooked meats, dips and sweets. This is one of the conventions of roleplaying – all

involved, except the DM, normally bring food items that are shared between players. There's a rap at the door, Carl answers and Evan arrives in a flurry and grabs me in a hug, "how are you doing!" he exclaims, "it's been ages" I respond. He opens his backpack and adds more items of food to the table. Somehow the conversation shifts to the topic of the Flat Earth Society because Evan has been watching Youtube videos on this subject. A debate ensues as joined by Will who arrives shortly after. Carl leaves the room momentarily and returns with what looks like a magazine in a clear plastic folder. He hands it to Will explaining that it's a gift he bought for him when he was in the Unites States. Will expresses surprise and gratitude as the item is a very collectible adventure for another very well-known role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*. Carl says that he's aware that it's a rare item and jokes that it "cost more than £1", but does not mention the precise amount he did pay for it.

The conversation then shifts from the Flat Earth Society to music. A sense of excitement permeates the room. It's been around two months since the group played together and it's clear that they eagerly await the events of tonight's session, as do I. Will asks, rhetorically, where Alice is, expressing surprise that she did not arrive before he did given that his normal train was not running this weekend and he had to get a bus instead. Carl suggests that she might have stopped to get a pizza as she had mentioned this in one of the emails the group shared. Several minutes later Evan's mobile phone rings - it's Alice asking if anyone wants pizza. All eyes turn to the food-laden table and we unanimously decide that we don't need any more food. Ten minutes or so later Alice arrives, we all greet her and she helps herself to the food on the table. With a hint of impatience, Will suggests Alice eat at the gaming table – Will has always felt that there is too much procrastination before our gaming sessions and feels that we never get enough done in the sessions because of this. There is agreement that we should start and we relocate to the gaming room where a large black table that dominates the centre of the room is set up. Will locates himself at one end behind his 'Judge's screen' – a makeshift combination constructed from three pieces of card Will has made himself and a gatefold LP cover of the progressive rock/folk band Jethro Tull chosen by Will because the psychedelic image it bears captures the aesthetic of the dimension-hopping adventures that characterise *DCC*. Behind the screen we catch glimpses of

bits of paper and maps – the adventure Will has prepared - but not long enough for us to really see anything. Even when Will leaves the room, no-one in the group is tempted to look at the adventure. Will proceeds to pass over four pieces of well-used paper covered in writing and sketches in pencil. These are our 'character sheets' – they contain all the information about the characters we play in the game. Evan plays a cleric of a god called Lakalos, hell-bent on converting those he meets to his religion, Carl a wild-haired wizard, Alice a reptilian thief of ambiguous gender and I play a female warrior on a quest to right the abuses of the nobility. Will plays the role of everybody else we meet in the game, whether they are dragons or innkeepers – referred to quite formally as non-player characters (NPCs). Our character sheets are broken up into boxes. Some contain numbers: a character's statistics - strength, agility, stamina, intelligence, personality and luck – as well as figures for things like armour, how much damage a character can do – other boxes contain writing, lists of equipment, spells and the margins and backs are covered in scrawls, notes and illustration from previous sessions. Some have use, some are no more than doodles. Finally Will empties a bag of brightly coloured dice onto the table with a clatter.

Will begins by asking us if we remember what had happened in the last session and what our ultimate goal is. Between the four of us we piece together our memories of what had occurred in the prior session. We were currently on the volcano island of Spyrios in some unknown dimension and we had just captured and returned the evil half-brother – Vali - of the island's ruler Gerrants who had been subsequently executed. We had also returned a cherry tree sacred to the island that Vali had stolen. This is the second time we have helped the people of the island and we have very good standing with Gerrants and the people more generally. Will reminds us that we have a bigger mission, to return to the dimension from which we originated. To do so we have learned from a sage on the island that there is a portal at the bottom of the ocean that can take us there, but to get to this we must transform our bodies to aquatic forms and the only place he knows of where we can do this is called 'The Ghouls Market' and the only way to get there is to find a magic bridge in the centre of a place called 'The Charnel Isle' where the forces of chaos and law fight an eternal battle even beyond death.

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After this recap the session begins proper and we recall that our plan was to use our goodwill to recruit soldiers who will help us get to the magic bridge on the Charnel Isla, as on our last visit we had not fared so well there. Will tells us that Gerrants won't provide us with any of his own soldiers, but says that we are free to recruit anyone willing to accompany us. He also reminds us that the Charnel Isle is a known and much-feared destination for the island-folk. Evan suggests that we compose a speech and Will suggests that for the sake of simplicity and time we break it down into three main points. Carl suggests that the first point should be that if it wasn't for us they would be dead. This prompts laughter, but we agree that it's a valid, if blunt point. Evan suggests that we should use the threat of chaos – a dangerous and threatening cosmic force – suggesting that those who accompany us will defeat chaos once and for all. There is a more considered debate about what the third and final point should be, but Evan suggests that we use a symbol that is important to the people and that we were responsible for retrieving – and suggests simply: "for the cherry tree!"

Will explains that whoever of us is making the recruitment speech needs to roll a twenty-sided die (d20) for each point in the speech. He will choose a number he thinks reflects the point's level of persuasiveness and that this roll will be modified by any 'Personality' score bonuses. He adds that for each successful roll we will gain an extra 5 volunteers. We have no idea how many volunteers we will get in the end. Will explains that the population of the island is probably only around 600 so we shouldn't get our hopes up too much. Evan suggests optimistically that we could get 20, whereas Alice thinks 10 is a more realistic number. I agree with Alice. We decide that we'll aim for 20, but expect to get 10. Will interrupts our ruminations to ask who is going to make the recruitment speech. My character has the highest Personality score of 13 which has a '+1' bonus, so I volunteer to do the speech. A sense of anticipation fills the room as Will sets the scene – "It's late afternoon at the harbour and a large crowd has gathered to listen to your speech. Vangardia makes the first point. You'd all be dead if it wasn't for us". He grins to himself, "it's not the best way to ingratiate yourselves" he says "so you'll need to roll 15 or more". I roll the d20 and let it tumble to the table – the top-facing side says 8. "Nine, it's a fail" I say. Will describes the unimpressed mutterings of the crowd, then asks me

to roll the die again, for point two. He explains that it's a fairly good point and that it has a better chance of getting recruits, so I need to roll an 11 or more. I roll again, this time it's even worse: 4. Will explains that the crowd complain that they're safe on their island and that they'd rather not get involved. I prepare to make the final roll – "this is a strong point" Will says, you only need to roll a 9 or more. This time the roll is successful and Will explains that five men step forward to volunteer for the voyage. Will describes the crowd gradually dissipating leaving us with twenty volunteers, then asks what we're going to do with them. I consider the kind of thing my character would say, she's a fairly blunt talking individual who empathises with everyday people as she began her life as a serf, so I describe her stepping forward and announcing "beer on me!" - as taverns are well-worn fantasy locations for the beginning of adventures.

Will asks if there's anything else we want to do before we set off the following morning. Amongst other things, Evan suggests that we purchase some weapons for our recruits. We scan our character sheets to see how much money we have and realise that Alice's character is the only one who has a significant amount of gold so she is given responsibility for making purchases. This is one of the rare occasions where Will passes the rule book over the Judge's Screen open at the page that contains the price list for weaponry and Will is forced to pause for a moment, unable to answer some of the questions Evan is also asking him about a spell he has just acquired. Because of this he gives Alice a maximum five minutes to make her purchases.

Two hours later we find ourselves at our destination on the Charnel Isle. Things are not looking great for our party: the recruits who are not dead have fled after my character was possessed by a magical sword and began attacking them mercilessly and I was brought under control by a spell cast by Carl's wizard. We now find ourselves at the strange glowing bridge were the portal to The Ghoul Market is said to appear, but it's guarded by a mysterious figure – a tall blue woman with two red dogs who is playing a flute. A debate ensues about how we should respond. Carl suggests that we just order my character to attack her as there is a possibility that she is now indestructible. Then Alice suggests that

she will take a flute we found in an earlier adventure and join her in a duet. Everyone laughs at this novel idea and Will responds enthusiastically – "okay make a roll to see how well you play". Alice rolls well "I've passed!" she yells. Will describes the response of the mysterious blue lady: "she turns to you her blue hair swirling around her head and says 'you play very well for a mortal, who are you and what is it you want here?'" Alice explains that we've come to complete a ritual in so that we can pass to the Ghoul's Market. The blue woman responds "in that case you must face me in a music duel – if you win I will let you pass, if you lose I will destroy you and your friends!" we look at one another and Alice says "I accept". The room goes hush, we all assume that Alice will fail the roll. Will hands her a d20 and asks her what she's going to play, Alice says "a thief kind of tune", he asks her to roll the die, but doesn't tell her what number she must roll. Alice rolls the dice and the upmost face shows a '20', we cheer with genuine surprise - it's a critical success. Will explains that the blue lady accepts her defeat with good grace and leaves. We complete the ritual on the bridge, a strange grey portal appears and we jump through and Will describes a strange misty world where only a single sign is visible which reads 'The Ghoul Market'.

2.3. The Subject in Games

Two games, one digital, the other analogue, both described as roleplaying games, both set in 'high' fantasy worlds where magic, dragons and other supernatural powers were presented as everyday phenomena. Both games focused on improving a character through the mechanism of 'levelling', overcoming encounters with enemies and the acquisition of magic items. Even without any significant analysis however it's not difficult to discern some stark differences between them. During *DCC* Will displayed a great deal of faith in the capabilities of the people who played even though some of them were relatively inexperienced. The rules were referred to when it was deemed necessary, but this occurred relatively infrequently and the players were quite comfortable with this arrangement. Will did not share any strategies or tactics about how the players might make progress through the game, although when he was feeling generous he occasionally suggested approaches that could slightly

reduce the risks players took, but only if he felt it might be fatal for a player's character. The game world was elucidated through descriptions by Will and through the questions asked by the players, but rules and explicit reference to game mechanics seldom featured in this dialogue. It was only actions judged by Will to represent a genuine risk to a player's character, such as combat or picking a lock, that were subject to explicit rules and even under these circumstances only a limited amount of information was provided for the players concerning how these rules worked. Although it's not the case that players of pen and paper roleplaying games always demonstrated this degree of indifference to the game mechanics, the genre is typified as highly open-ended and productive of improvisation, both for players and the Judge who had to respond to the unexpected activities of players (Fine 1983).

A negotiated complicity between the Judge and the players was engendered in which the former concealed the rules and the latter practiced inattention to the rules as material forms. Instead the onus was on, and agency was located in participants to generate outcomes. In this way it alluded to human subjects as unpredictable and capable of improvisation, qualities imagined to be productive of engaging experiences. Like most role-playing game manuals, *DCC* provided almost nothing in the way of explanation about how to play beyond those that described the game's mechanics. Page 10 of the book offered a series of eight 'qualifications', the first of which stated:

> That you are a fantasy enthusiast of imaginative mind, familiar with the customs of roleplaying, understand the history and significance of the Elder Gods Gygax and Arneson and their cohorts Bledsaw, Homes, Kask, Kuntz, Mentzer and Moldvay and knowledgeable of the role of "judge" and the practice of adventure. (Goodman 2012)

DCC was considered to be an RPG for more experienced gamers, so seemed to dispense with any attempt to articulate the practice of roleplaying. More typical of the kind of explanation these games provided could be found in *Labyrinth Lord*, a game targeted at less experienced players. In this case the rulebook provided one short paragraph on the subject that appeared to be intentionally vague:

'You are about to enter an entirely new world. Unlike board or card games that have highly structured play options and little flexibility, most of the action in *Labyrinth Lord* takes place in your imagination. There are no limits!' (Proctor 2009: 4)

No further guidance was supplied to explain how participants were to use their imaginations in practice. The remainder of the rulebook contained tables, lists and bald textual descriptions of the game's mechanics that was the convention of the genre. It was as though the 'imagination' required no further elucidation, which we might read as a further indication of the extent to which this genre of games assumed the productive capacities of players as given rather than attempting to prescribe rules or guidelines that informed players how to use their imaginations. Notably, rules were not used to obstruct or to put constraints on the performative aspirations of players – they might not always succeed at their endeavours and sometimes Will would claim that a proposed action was 'impossible' but he avoided invoking rules that stated this explicitly, even going out of his way to clarify this when the formal rules could be interpreted as stating otherwise. The pen and paper roleplaying game has often been described as one of the more open-ended genres of game, the point I wish to draw attention to here is that within this rubric humans were conceived as creative subjects on whom the onus to produce the game as an experiential form was placed. Whereas dice rolls resolved risk through stochastic chance, it was the performative contingency of participants that produced meaningful outcomes. The mechanical consequences of rules and the decisions of participants were made meaningful by improvised responses. Whereas mechanics were predictably uncertain – resulting in degrees of success or failure typically contingent on the numerical outcome of the roll of a die or dice - the performative acts of both players and Judge were considerably less predictable and notably less reductive. The combination of the open-endedness of *DCC* and the limited use of rules reckoned the subject's capacity for unpredictability in positive ways as productive of creative responses and meaning.

In this way the pen and paper roleplaying game was the perfect foil for *World of Warcraft* where the opposite pertained. Here too, unpredictability was conceived as a fundamental human quality, but in this context it was not productive of desirable outcomes but of forms of fallibility that were fundamentally problematic. Players were understood as error-prone and liable to failure at performative activities and this was a condition that necessitated attention and often correction. By contrast with the open-endedness of *DCC* and other pen and paper roleplaying games, in *World of Warcraft* outcomes were circumscribed by more distinct criteria for success and failure. Ambiguity was problematic and there were fewer possibilities for the production of alternative or more broadly meaningful responses through engagement with polysemic effects. The negotiation of meaning production in states of open-endedness is a focal concern of this study and constituted an instrumental concern for the application of bureaucratically imagined practices. Given this focus I want to consider Marshal Sahlins' account of the relationship between cultural schemes and history. Cultural schemes, Sahlins argues, order the form history takes, but they are also the outcomes of history, as meanings are revalued through and in their enactment (1985). People make sense of the world through cultural schemes and their actions are organised by them, yet the contingencies of life do not always conform to the cultural order and in these circumstances "people are known to creatively reconsider their conventional schemes" and "culture is historically altered in action"(vii). Sahlins refers to this as "structural transformation" because a shift in meaning in one location has a systematic knock-on effect on the cultural order as a whole. He draws a distinction between "the cultural order as constituted in the society and as lived by the people: structure in convention and action, as virtual and actual" that "social practice is informed by received meanings, but in practice they are submitted to empirical risks" (ix). Things, he explains, offer a clear example of this. They are both more particular inasmuch as signs are not bound to a single referent but may use multiple things as "tokens" of cultural types, yet may also represent a greater range of properties than conventional signs can contain.

Sahlins' concerns have greater temporal scope than my own, but we might adopt the tenets of his argument to aid our understanding of the differences between the accounts of *DCC* and *World of Warcraft* described above. The former, we might suggest, encouraged players to, using Sahlins' terminology, "gamble" with cultural categories: outcomes were always open to further interpretive acts that could produce or transform outcomes. A die roll may signify varying degrees of success or failure but it did not necessarily determine the form that success or failure took, nor could it predict the responses to the subsequent forms that emerged from this. Performative contingency was directed toward the production of semiotic meaning, which was itself an unpredictable form (Malaby 2006). Risk performed a critical mediating role in the production of a gaming session: unaware of the intentions of the GM, the actions of players invariably put their characters at risk, while the unpredictable actions of characters risked the narrative coherence and structural preparations of the GM. The intentional concealment of the rules, the material elements of the game, minimised their assertive properties and limited their capacity *vis-à-vis* the interpretive possibilities accorded to the players. The opposite charge may be levelled at *World of Warcraft* where risk posed more controversial concerns. Performance was always inherently risky: many of the activities in *World of Warcraft* revolved around combat with scripted in-game enemies and other players where the 'death' of a player's character was almost routine; the game world itself was also vast and, in uncharted territory, its expanse could pose a risk to navigation; stochastic chance was present in the form of randomly generated numerical outcomes; and social contingency was ever-present in encounters with other players, many of whom had pseudonymous identity. Unlike *DCC* however, for the members of Helkpo and *World of Warcraft* players in similar circumstances, this could represent an undesirable state of affairs. Players were a practical source of contingency in a number of ways – behaviourally they were unpredictable, they were inconsistent and their knowledge was imperfect. At a physiological level they also demonstrated cognitive limitations of attention and awareness and in terms of reflex speed and hand-to-eye co-ordination. Socially, players displayed tendencies to

miscommunicate their intentions and misunderstand the intentions of others and at worst could appear to be actively pursuing questionable agendas.

2.4. Architectural Rules and Social Rules

Games, as Malaby explains, are designed to produce contingency (2007) and in many respects *World of Warcraft* was no exception, even if it lacked the same degree of open-endedness as its immediate predecessors *Everquest* and *Ultima Online*. A certain comfortable logic would be fulfilled if, in contrast to the way rules were concealed in *DCC*, rules in *World of Warcraft* were highly visible, but this was arguably not the case, at least not in a simplistic way. Various academic writings have posited rules as a defining feature of games. To take just three examples: ludologist Jesper Juul's definition states that a game is "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 negotiable" (2005: 36); sociologist Roger Caillois, whose book *Man, Play and Games* (1961) pre-dated the current interest in games by almost half a century, provides a six part definition: games are free (non-obligatory), separate (set-off from the everyday), uncertain (the outcome cannot be determined), unproductive (creating neither goods nor wealth), governed by rules (suspension of ordinary laws) and make-believe (awareness of a 'second reality') (ibid: 9-10), and; even an outlier such as philosopher Bernard Suits arrives at the following definition: 'To play a game' he states 'is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]' (1978: 54-55).

Somewhat in contrast with this focus on rules as central features of games, Malaby makes the case that in digital games rules are more implicit than their physical counterparts because they are embedded and 'naturalised' in their coded architecture (2013). As such "experiential processes…

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[made] claims through the implicit involvement of the players and their growing, embodied mastery of the complex system of the game" (ibid: 11). His position shares similarities with that of Lawrence Lessig, whose concerns take in 'cyberspace' in general. Lessig's arguments on the relationship between regulation and code are worth considering here (2006). In short Lessig argues that in digital contexts code is effectively law, but it is even more efficient than is otherwise the case because unlike 'physical-world' law which operates through threats, code in some respects controls the very 'physics' of cyberspace, therefore it's not simply that people *should* not break the law and the law is enforceable only through the threat of force but that they *cannot* break the law. In this sense 'cyberspace', as Lessig sees it, is a space that offers unprecedented possibility for regulation. Short of hacking code, in cyberspace people's behaviour must conform to the code, the only alternative being to cease participation.

For Malaby and Lessig 'the rules' are located in the very architecture of software code, constraining the possibilities of what players (or users) may actually do often without them necessarily being aware of what these constraints are or what they are intended to accomplish. As far as *World of Warcraft* was concerned, the validity of these claims varied depending upon what aspect of the complex software and experiential artifact was the focus of attention. What might be regarded as initially implicit rules became, through repeated engagement with the game and the instruction of other players, more structurally visible to players. A skilled raider by the time she joined Helkpo in late 2010, Anna's account was typical of the kind of reflections players supplied of their early experiences of the game:

> Oh god, I didn't have a clue what I was doing, well I thought I did, but I was just running around
> collecting things. It was just fun. I had no idea about gear or anything. I was wearing a 'grey'
> belt, to me it was a belt and I liked it, but one day another player 'whispered' me, I think I was
> doing a dungeon, and told me I needed a better belt. So I asked him why and he told me that

I'd 'do more damage' and I thought to myself, 'why do I need to do more damage?' Looking

back it's so funny, it's hard to believe that I was ever like that.

By the time of my fieldwork, *World of Warcraft* had emerged from the period of its life characterised

by 'interpretive flexibility' a term developed by Pinch and Bijker (2012) to describe how in the early

days of a new technology there is no dominant interpretation of its meaning and form, and was in a

period of relative 'closure' characterised by greater stability. Although this did not in any way prevent

Blizzard adding new features to the game, these were now evidently much more concerned with

maintaining the most engaged behaviours of players than challenging them (see Chapter 5 for full

discussion). The consequence of this was that players were so familiar with the architecture of the

game that some felt design had ceased to be genuinely innovative. During a conversation about the

somewhat controversial *Mists of Pandaria* expansion, Jewlz, who as ever favoured a pragmatic

perspective, put forth his views in expressly ambivalent terms:

> The prevalent opinion I've found thus far is 'almost as good as Wrath of the Lich King was but
>
> more polished and even more refined than that, though less engaging due to inherently less
>
> interesting source material'. Still, no matter how you cut it, MoP is still WoW. Your journey to
>
> 90 is irrelevant. Dailies and gear-farming is obligatory unless your biggest ambition is LFR. If
>
> you read quest-text before MoP, you'll read better stuff now. If you didn't, you won't and not
>
> be the poorer. But at the same time MoP is also still WoW. Encounter design is top-notch,
>
> both in variety and execution. Tons and tons of random achievements to get. Everything that
>
> was good about WoW is still there and the flip side of that is then...

Jewlz brusque manner may have been exceptional, but he articulated a common perspective on *World

of Warcraft* from around 2010 onwards, which was that there were fundamental architectural

features of its design that persisted alongside additional mechanics or aesthetic improvements which

were viewed as supplemental variations on a theme rather than being strictly 'new'. Raph Koster, the

original lead designer of *Everquest*, the forerunner to MMO from which *World of Warcraft* evolved,

used similar language in the opening paragraph of his article celebrating ten years *of World of Warcraft* in November 2014:

> *WoW* has always been a contradiction of sorts: not the pioneer, but the one that solidified the pattern. Not the experimenter, but the one that reaped the rewards. Not the innovator, but the one that was well-designed, built solidly, and made appealing. It was the MMO that took what has always been there, and delivered it in a package that was truly broadly appealing, enough so to capture the larger gamer audience for the first time.[5]

The basic structure of engagement – the linear progression of characters, completion of quests, participation in group content, escalation of rewards, etc. – was familiar to players, not least because some of these traits were a standard feature of the 'roleplaying game' (RPG) genre, some of which stretched back to its pen and paper origins from the early 1970s. At this time even those newer to the game in Helkpo had been playing for almost two years, which constituted a great deal of time for any kind of videogame.

These features of *World of Warcraft*'s architecture were particularly salient, but not all of the game's architecture was so easily discerned. For example, different parts of the game's code were more or less accessible depending on what purpose and function they fulfilled. The game itself was distinctive because while most of the code was stored locally on a player's computer, known as the 'client', in order to run it had to be connected to a remotely located 'server' , rumoured to be housed in Paris for those playing in the EU. Although most of the game was stored and played on a player's computer, in order for changes to be affected on the world's game-state data had to be sent to the servers where outcomes were calculated which were then sent back to the client on the player's computer. Different elements of the game were written in different coding languages, the game engine that determined the actions and responses of the game world (the environment, responses of enemies and NPCs) was

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[5] http://www.raphkoster.com/2014/11/21/ten-years-of-world-of-warcraft/

written in C/C++ the workings of which were largely inaccessible to players other than inferentially. The User Interface (UI) was written in LUA and XML and this code could be accessed and modified by players and supported player made 'addons' that enabled players to access a wider range of information through the UI. Other features of the game such as the databases that calculated outcomes were less easily comprehended. For example the likelihood that an enemy monster ('mob') would drop a specific item varied. Some items such as money and crafting materials were common enough that a 100% drop rate could be assumed, whereas for rarer items such as magic weapons or armour a much lower drop rate might be assigned. These rules required collective effort to make explicit which was achieved by players using addons which recorded frequency of drops and then assigned a percentage value to them. These values, however, were not directly taken from the database but were inferred estimates based on empirical data rather than the actual code. The architecture of the game was made up of rules operating and interacting at different levels, some of which were almost entirely opaque and inaccessible, some which could be inferred, some which provided a more explicit set of visible guidelines that were evident to players and some of which were made increasingly more visible through design changes implemented by Blizzard in various iterations of the game.

Focussing on these kinds of rules, what I will refer to as 'architectural rules', however, fails to account for rules that emerged from the community of *World of Warcraft* players. As the name would suggest social rules operated differently to architectural rules. They were more difficult to enforce than those that were embedded in the game's architecture because they lacked the non-negotiable constraints that code imposed on action – they lacked its coercive power to shape player behaviour – they also lacked the ubiquity and coherence of code. It was not always apparent what the 'correct' social rules were and even social rules with a strong cultural foothold in the game could be challenged. Social rules were not as intimately bound up with processes of performative mastery that was the case for architectural rules. Perhaps the most striking of these social rules and the one that has received academic attention was the phenomenon of 'Dragon Kill Points' (DKP) (Fairfield and Castranova 2006,

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Nardi and Kallinikos 2007, Malone 2009, Silverman and Simon 2009). DKP was an entirely player-developed system developed to manage the distribution of in-game items amongst raiders. The existence of DKP actually pre-dated *World of Warcraft* and was attributed to a player in *Everquest* known as 'Thott'. The basic structure of the system revolved around the award of points to players for participating in guild activities such as raiding, these points would then be spent to acquire items that dropped from raid bosses. Beyond this functional explanation the use of DKP has been charged with the accomplishment of various social rules such as guild cohesion and commitment (Malone 2009) and the articulation of disciplinary and panoptic power (Silverman and Simon 2009). A number of DKP addons existed that embedded this system into a player's game interface such that it could be experienced as part of the game world itself.

The vast majority of social rules were not nearly as structured or systemic as DKP, however. Yet far from undermining their value, the gap that existed between the relative effectiveness of social rules and the seemingly absolute necessity of architectural rules became the site for a novel synthesis of the two forms of rules in which the legitimacy of social rules was accomplished through recourse to the non-negotiable status of the game's architecture. The issue of performance and the problematic player were key modes of subjectivity around which this fusion of social and architectural rules were accomplished because of the profusion of technologies that produced knowledge forms claiming to represent the game's architecture. An example that players often encountered in PvP (Player vs Player) servers like the one on which I conducted my fieldwork was the 'correct' response to being killed by characters from the opposing faction. Unlike PvE (Player vs Environment) servers, on PvP servers players were always at risk from their character being attacked and killed by players from the enemy faction. This was often referred to by both victims and perpetrators as 'ganking'. Technically ganking was the term used to describe this kind of act only if the perpetrator or perpetrators were significantly more powerful in terms of levels or in greater numbers than the victim, but it tended to be used to describe any situation where the victim felt that they were an unwilling participant in the action. Yet there was a clear normative desire to present unwillingness as an impossible situation for

a player to be in because they were on a PvP server. Take the following exchange in which a Horde player used the public chat channel that was visible to every player of the same faction in the same zone:

Abacabb: you fucking wimp

Abacabb: just let me stand there being ganked by two wankers

Zeanto: sad story

Unholydazir: yup

Kalifno: i cried a little

Unholydazir: better love story than twilight

Zeanto: i cried evertim

Lehrek: winner: best original screenplay

Unholydazir: I'm looking forward to sequel

Abacabb: oh and a server hop omfg them bitches I swear. Alliance suck my end

Slithra: best objective portrayal of Horde in media

Kalifno: there it was

Korogg: go cry me a river

Abacabb: foff, korogg, it happens to you yea and you just smile don't you, thank you alliance for killing me over and over after all that affort, twats

Kalifno: go join a normal server if it makes you so sad

Korogg: yeah I don't give a fuck, if you can't handle dying go play on a pve server

Part of the outrage expressed by the ganked player, 'Abacabb' was that another Horde player had observed him being ganked and had not attempted to intervene. Yet the overwhelming public and normative response to 'Abacabb' was to treat his outcry not just sarcastically and obnoxiously but to position his sense of injustice as erroneous because his complaint was directed at an activity that was made possible by an architectural feature of the game designed into some, but not all servers. 'Kalifno' and 'Korogg' suggested that Abacabb should have joined a PvE server where the game would be coded to prevent this happening. This kind of complaint and response wasn't exclusive to public exchanges, I had seen it happen within Helkpo and players recounted similar stories to me, from both sides. These kinds of encounters between players may not conventionally be considered 'performative', but performance took many forms in *World of Warcraft* (Chen 2012) and what players said, as much as what they did, submitted them to risk, was invariably interpreted in terms of mastery and failure. In the example above, as far as the community norms went Abacabb had failed to understand *World of Warcraft*. What these kinds of encounters illustrate is how coded rules were not solely the province of design where they maintained implicit structures for and constraints of performance, but could be enrolled in explicitly meaningful community endeavours in which the more open-ended possibilities of player performance were subject to socially constructed rules that attempted to structure and constrain in an analogous fashion. Importantly the community was not inherently technocratic, the intention was not to produce technological solutions to performative problems, but to use a particular understanding of technology to construct a sense of order and control where coded architecture was deemed to be at its least effective. If code in *World of Warcraft* was effectively 'natural law', in line with Lessig's conception, then the legitimacy of social laws was seen to rest on sharing this origin, albeit in a more attenuated form.

2.5. Transparency and Design

The social rules of *World of Warcraft* were in constant tension with the performative contingency of players, the latitude it provided in this particular space of the game and the regular changes made to

the game by Blizzard that altered the architectural base on which these rules derived their legitimacy, it therefore required continuous effort to construct social rules as inherent rather than as an arbitrary cultural form. Underlying this shifting technological ground lay a specific technological imaginary in which computers, code and game design were fundamentally transparent, an invocation that has a (relatively) venerable pedigree in the history of computing. Sherry Turkle sees transparency as crucial to the conception of the personal computer in its earliest incarnation in 1970s North America. In her encounters with early users of home computers Turkle describes this as a quality of the relationship many people developed with their machines (1984). For these people the computer addressed an issue, whether it was a sense of technical or mathematical incompetence or a sense of alienation in the workplace due to the fragmentation of manufacturing practices at the time. As Turkle puts it, the possibilities of the home computer contrasted the failures of the ideals promised by the political upheaval of the 1960s, it promised immediacy, de-centralisation, it enabled the evolution of grass-roots communities from which a more honest and open political agenda might come to the fore. In this imagining the computer as system was juxtaposed with politics as a system: if the former was knowable in its entirety then this model could be extended to the latter (Turkle 1984: 177). From this engagement with machines there emerged a "computer culture around a widely shared aesthetic of simplicity, intelligibility, control and transparency" (ibid: 186) and a device that became a metaphor of resolution for the feelings of political discontent that characterised this point in the history of the United States.

As a technical artifact the personal computer was a material resource with which people thought about the possibilities of an alternative political system. In various ways it presented itself as a reified object of complexity that could be stripped back to its fundamental operating languages, the 0s and 1s that underpinned the high level machine languages and compilers that made it possible to grasp otherwise obtuse mathematical problems, in short its particular form and affordances provided materials through which new possibilities could be conceived. In *World of Warcraft* transparency was less a quality of the computers on which the game was played, than it was the design and mechanics

of the game - the architecture of *World of Warcraft* provided material for the imagining of a completely intelligible system. A number of factors influenced this conception of the game, including the relative 'ease' or as Blizzard preferred to describe it 'accessibility' of the game and its linear and progressive structure, but far more significant to the reproduction of this idea were the countless numbers of community produced online resources dedicated to the discussion and dissection of *World of Warcraft* that formed a kind of substrate of discursive media that ranged from subjective opinion to the baldly factual. These websites included vast encyclopaedic undertakings, such as WoWWiki that as of January 2016 contained over 103,000 pages according to its homepage, which compiled information on every aspect of the game from the 'lore' (the fictional history of the game world) to explanations of technical issues such as latency to the more stripped back 'guides' that laid out utilitarian descriptions of how players could optimise performance of their class, choose the best gear and defeat raid bosses, to name just a few examples. Alongside these textual and image based resources were video guides that proved particularly useful for players as they often captured the subtleties of performance that words and still images could not.

Surprisingly little attention has been devoted to these sites of knowledge production and dissemination, even when their significance has been acknowledged as important to understanding engagement with *World of Warcraft*. Alex Golub, whose paper will be considered shortly, has emphasised both the importance of sites beyond the boundaries of the game world and the collective knowledge production of players but has spared little room to discuss the form in which this knowledge was mediated (2010). Yet the way knowledge was represented on these websites is key to understanding how the game was constructed as transparent and legible. During the observation of play during fieldwork it became apparent how these websites often provided backdrops to play, quite literally, as more often than not they were open in an internet browser window that could be quickly accessed by tabbing in and out of the game. Here the priority is to interrogate the rhetorical form in which knowledge was presented on these websites in order to understand how a complex software artifact was ordered and simplified in order that it be made legible. A central consideration this

process of legibility was the way this information was mediated. While maps, images and videos were important expressions of knowledge, the most dominant form was the written (or typed) word. In *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* Jack Goody argues that, amongst other factors, the introduction of writing in previously oral societies had the effect of making implicit 'norms' into something more like explicit 'rules' or 'laws' in regards to domains such as customs, exchange and religion (1986). It may be far-fetched to describe *World of Warcraft* as an oral society, but its architecture certainly mitigated against the long-term storage of player-produced texts. Text was by far the primary means by which players communicated within the game through various 'chat channels', but unless a player went out of their way to preserve it, text had a very limited lifespan. A player could access any text that had been created while they were logged on, but on logging out it would be erased from the client memory and nor was it stored on Blizzard's servers. A player could save chat files onto their own computer's hard drive or take screenshots that were automatically saved as jpeg files, but these files did not constitute a body of collective knowledge, but personal files.

Goody's discussion of writing is less concerned with personal and private acts of text production and is more concerned with formal texts, such as religious, legal and state codification, as examples of the earliest uses of written records. Although a central organising institution was absent, the player-produced resources should be understood not just as an act of making the implicit rules of *World of Warcraft* explicit, but as a kind of formal codification of the architecture of *World of Warcraft*. Goody explains that "the creation of a legal text involves a formalization (e.g. a numbering of the laws), a universalization (e.g. an extension of their range by the elimination of their particularities) and an ongoing rationalization" (1986: 129) features quite characteristic of the way knowledge of the game was produced and presented. Goody notes that the process of translation from oral and implicit to written and explicit was generally not simply a case of reproducing pre-existing knowledge and information but, in giving it new form, altered the modes through which people engaged with it. Firstly, more so perhaps than any of the examples Goody provides, the process of translation from coded architecture, we might even say languages of code, to text represents a considerable change in

form. Unlike Goody's examples in which literacy was often exclusive to an elite minority and therefore enabled a strict monopoly on power, the production of resource websites made *World of Warcraft* significantly more accessible, further enabled by the distributive possibilities of the internet. As a collective and non-centralised effort, what was remarkable about these websites was the degree of consistency maintained in terms of their content and form across different sites. There is no question that this was a consequence of mutual copying, but the end result was the same - a sense of there being a universal and definitive way the game should be played.

Regarding the form, the 'aesthetics' this knowledge took, there was too a distinct style shared by these sites, principally composed of what Goody terms language that was 'non-syntactic' that placed emphasis "not on the more complicated narrative, literary or descriptive uses of language… much further removed from speech, being largely composed of a set of lexemes that are lifted from context" (1986: 94). This aesthetic plainly drew on the formalistic style of bureaucratic documentation one might find in a manual containing rules or other forms of instruction that posits a direct and referential relationship to that which it describes, that claim to "represent, engage with, or constitute realities 'in the world' independent from the processes that produce [them]" (Hull 2012: 5). This form of text production often employed a distinctively de-personalised semiotic in which linguistic terms seen to imply the involvement of idiosyncratic perspectives were expunged or otherwise utilised techniques to establish the authorial credentials of the authors. In this way these texts were seen to represent *World of Warcraft* in a largely unproblematic, isomorphic manner and verified it as a wholly knowable and transparent software object.

2.6. Performance and Transparency

This section examines an example of the aesthetic of knowledge production in *World of Warcraft* by looking at how these sites presented information about how players should perform their character class through the use of abilities known as class 'guides'. This kind of knowledge was considered essential for players who wished to raid and more generally represented the principal way in which a

player could learn to master the game. To begin with it's important to recognise that the architecture of *World of Warcraft*'s interface supplied very little information about how players should do this. Understanding when and how to use abilities was considered the key to mastering the game, yet the interface provided only the most perfunctory information. For example the description of the Marksmanship Hunter ability Chimaera Shot supplied in a player's 'spellbook', an interface panel that listed all of a character's abilities, was of a purely technical form:

> Chimaera Shot
>
> 35 Focus   40 yd range
>
> Instant cast   9 sec cooldown
>
> Requires Hunter (Marksmanship)
>
> Requires Level 60
>
> Requires Ranged Weapon
>
> A two-headed shot that hits your primary target and another nearby target dealing [x]
>
> Nature or Frost damage to each target

In 2012 an additional 'tab' called 'Core Abilities' was added to a player's spellbook that provided a minimal amount of information about how players could use their abilities. For a level 100 Marksmanship Hunter it provided the following list:

> Aimed Shot: use when nothing else is available
>
> Chimaera Shot: use when available, especially to hit 2 targets
>
> Steady Shot: use when you are low on focus
>
> Kill Shot: use when target is near death

The addition of this feature to the game was clearly targeted at novice players or at least players who were new to a character class where it might have been assumed that a large volume of information would be confusing. However, even for experienced players no further information was supplied by the game's architecture in regards to how and when abilities should be used. Thus, in the context of the game, knowledge of how to perform remained highly opaque and open-ended. Players had a wide range of abilities, especially at maximum level that were accompanied by similar information to that shown for Chimaera Shot above, but with little other than these technical details to distinguish their function. Players usually assessed these abilities on which had the highest numbers for damage or healing. As far as performance went then, a player could ostensibly choose what abilities they used and when they wanted to use them without any definitive baseline against which mastery could be ascertained beyond success or failure in practice.

'Player guides', by contrast, provided players with seemingly complete knowledge of how to master and improve performance. Icy Veins was one of the more popular guides and it also provided 'news and information' about other Blizzard games such as *Diablo*. While the centre of the front page was dominated by 'news' stories ranging from changes to these games to interviews with 'experts' and opinion pieces, the sections of the website that were most popular with players were those that contained guides not just for character class but also raids and quests. Although the site's background combined a decorative grey-blue colour scheme with a graphic representing a cracked ice surface, it employed a distinct aesthetic of clarity and order. Guides were shown in a horizontal list beneath the website header at the top of the page and when a cursor was hovered over one of the entries a dropdown box appeared providing a neat sub-list of content. It was within the guides themselves that a particular aesthetic was employed that conveyed a form of objectivity through the adoption of rhetorical devices such as bullet points, numbered sections and instructional language absent from which was a subjective voice or grammatical caveats such as subjunctives that would suggest that what was written was anything other than fact. The 'class' guide for 'Marksman' hunter characters for

example replicated the same structure as those for the other classes, providing an overview page containing short headed paragraphs – 'general information', 'about our reviewer', 'class overview' and 'contents' – the latter providing hyperlinks in bullet-pointed format. Under 'general information' the text stated the purpose of the guide:

'Welcome to our Marksmanship Hunter DPS guide for *World of Warcraft* WoD 6.2.2. Here, you will learn everything you need to know about playing a Marksmanship Hunter in a raid environment, although most of the content also applies to normal and heroic dungeons.'

The statement that the reader 'will learn everything you need to know' makes a substantial claim about the information the site provided and also made a tacit assertion about the kind of *game World of Warcraft* was. The form in which this knowledge was presented conveyed the impression that the design of *World of Warcraft* was simple and easily comprehended. Take the section titled 'rotation, cooldowns and abilities', in 'section 1' a series of numerical points informed the reader that:

The rotation for Marksmanship Hunters can easily be summarised in the following priority system. Note that, when the boss is over 80% health, the rotation is slightly different. We cover this in a subsequent section.

1. Cast Chimaera Shot on cooldown.
2. Cast Kill Shot on cooldown
   o can only be cast when the target is at or below 35% health.
3. Cast Aimed Shot if Rapid Fire is active or if the target is above 80% health.
4. Use Stampede, if you have taken this talent.
5. Cast Glaive Toss or Barrage, depending on your talent choice.
6. Cast Aimed Shot to dump Focus.
7. Cast Steady Shot (or Focusing Shot, if you are using this talent) to generate Focus.

- If using Steady Focus as your tier 5 talent, make sure to use Steady Shot in pairs. Your goal is to maintain as high an uptime on the buff it offers as possible, while not sacrificing any of the abilities in the priority.

The most important thing to watch out for is not to Focus starve yourself such that you do not have enough Focus to cast your abilities on cooldown.

The guide provided further information about how rotation should change when attacking multiple targets, how to use 'cooldown' abilities and an 'optional read' subtitled 'mastering your marksmanship hunter' which went into even greater detail about how rotation should be altered under different conditions. At the top of the guide, under a header titled 'about our reviewer' the information was given authorial validity:

"This guide has been reviewed and approved by two of the best Hunters in the world. Niixx raids in Limit and you can watch his stream on Twitch. Azortharion raids in Ðanish Terrace and you can also watch his stream on Twitch. They both maintain their own Hunter guide, as well"

The purpose of this guide was to describe the order in which a player with a Marksmanship Hunter should prioritise abilities in combat in order to optimise damage output. A Marksmanship Hunter was required, in most cases, to do as much damage (DPS) as possible to enemy 'mobs'. 'Cooldown' referred to the amount of time a player had to wait before an ability could be re-used (some refreshed faster than others). This mattered because in order to do as much damage as possible a player had to use abilities as soon as they became available, i.e. came off cooldown. Finally 'focus' was the resource hunter characters used up when they used most abilities, although some abilities also regenerated focus. An important part of a competent hunter performance was the maintenance of enough focus to always be able to use the highest prioritised ability when it was available and at the same time ensure that it was never maxed out which would have been considered 'wasteful'.

Crucially, the form in which this information was presented was not unique to Icy Veins, numerous sites replicated this information and its aesthetic. Wowhead was one of the most popular sources of information for players and even more so that Icy Veins produced knowledge in the formal manner of a database. Its guide for Marksmanship Hunters was presented in a similar format, the principal difference being that it was even more stripped back:

Rotation

Single Target

1. Chimaera Shot
2. Kill Shot
3. Glaive Toss (skip this during Rapid Fire or when the target has >80% health)
4. Aimed Shot
5. Steady Shot

- Never delay Chimaera Shot
- Always be casting something on every available global cooldown to maximise DPS, even if it's not perfectly prioritized it's better than doing nothing

A final example comes from a blog that specialised in hunter performance and information called Hunters Union. The style of presentation on this blog was noticeably more discursive in character and presentation, containing longer passages of explanation and more granular discussion of the application of abilities under different circumstances. But the information was fundamentally the same. For example, under the heading 'MM Hunter Single-Target Rotation' the text explained:

Marksman MM Hunter Shot Priority During Careful Aim Range (Target is >80% health, and during Rapid Fire)

While the boss is over 80% health the MM hunter shot rotation is benefiting enormously from Careful Aim. Because of this we totally ignore most of our shots in favor of the massively hard-hitting Aimed Shot crits.

Unlike in MoP, you won't start your rotation burning through CDs. Some variation will exist in your opener depending on the total fight length, but in general, you'll start by pre-casting Glaive Toss from a reasonable distance, then pre-pot for Chim Shot and aMoC to burn through some focus and hopefully proc Thrill of the Hunt. Following those, cast Rapid Fire, and for the duration your priority will simply be:

- Chimaera Shot On Cooldown
- Aimed Shot spam

During the Careful Aim its worth keeping in mind that with TotH up Aimed shot becomes focus neutral. This is because your Aimed shot will almost always crit and return 20 focus (28 with the tier bonus) out of the 30 it cost, the other 10 focus is passively regen'ed during the cast time. If you have stacked RF with Blood Lust/Heroism it actually becomes focus positive. For the rest of your Careful Aim period, your rotation will look like this:

- Chimaera Shot
- Stampede/A Murder of Crows
- Aimed Shot
- Steady Shot/Focusing Shot to regen focus as needed

Note that due to the benefit of getting off as many Aimed Shots as possible during Careful Aim, and using Rapid Fire as many times as possible, even if your raid is using Ancient Hysteria (bloodlust or timewarp) on the pull, you'll still want to use Rapid Fire there as well.

The consistent form in which information was presented was not exclusive to these resource sites, but was also reproduced by players in their explanations and their performances. Observing players during combat encounters made it somewhat difficult to follow their actions, but players often tested their performative competences out on in-game 'dummies', targets that could be practiced on that were located in places like faction capital cities and on these occasions I was able to ask players to narrate the abilities they were employing. The transcript below comes from a conversation I had with a guild member called Ethan who joined Helkpo because like many players he had tried his hand at hard core raiding and wanted to join a guild were there was less pressure to commit to that kind of schedule. Despite his desire for more 'casual' play he still found himself highly engaged in understanding his class. He explained to me in great detail the rather arcane rotation he used to maximise the DPS of his Frost specced Death Knight character:

> There is no actual rotation. This sounds really wrong, I just mean that there is no set in stone kind of rotation for either 2-handed or duel wield Frost Death Knights as we are purely proc-based and must react in accordance to the situation at hand. I will probably explain this in a somewhat weird manner, but I'm just not savvy enough, so here goes:

> One: Killing Machine, a proc which gives our Frost Strike / Obliterate a 100% crit chance combined with Frost Strike is our most important thing. You see it, you launch it in the victim's face. This is our bread.

> Two: Howling Blast is our cleave and a great way to generate Runic Power, which is needed for Frost Strike. Essentially, this is our butter. It is because of this sweet ability Frost Death Knights excel at burst AoE situations. I use it combined with Necrotic Plague talent, as it makes my life much easier by turning our 2 diseases into 1 and in doing so removes the necessity to include Plague Strike into my rotation, which gives me an Unholy Rune for Obliteration, which is later turned into a Death Rune and is used to cast Howling Blast.

Three: Blood Tap / Plague Leech to generate additional Death Runes for even MORE Howling Blasts.

Four: Obliterate to turn Unholy Runes into Death Runes, can be combined with Killing Machine, but is *far* weaker than the blessed Frost Strike. Generates free casts of Howling Blast, as alas these give no Runic Power.

So, basically, you have to always jump between these things. Feels fun 80% of the time.

By the standards of any class rotation in *World of Warcraft* it was fairly complex and it was evident that he had put in a great deal of time and effort to learn how to perform his class. He had also explained to me that his preferred resource was Icy Veins so I decided to see what rotation the site suggested. It was apparent that Ethan had assimilated this information and expressed the rotation in his own words and concepts, yet at the same time it was largely analogous with that described on the Icy Veins website albeit explained in a slightly different order.

1. Cast Plague Leech (if you have taken this talent)
   - only when you have 2 runes fully depleted.
2. Cast Soul Reaper (use Blood Tap if a rune is needed)
   - Only when Soul Reaper will tick (5 seconds after the cast) when the target is below 35% health.
3. Cast Frost Strike
   - only when you have a Killing Machine proc.
4. Cast Obliterate
   - when both your Unholy runes are available OR

- when you have a Killing Machine proc and you have no Runic Power to use Frost Strike.

5. Cast Defile, if you have taken this talent (use Blood Tap if a rune is needed). Only use it if the majority of its ticks will affect your target.

6. Cast Frost Strike, if you have over 88 Runic Power.

7. Cast Howling Blast
   - when you have a Rime proc OR
   - when you have a Frost or a Death rune available.

8. Maintain your disease(s) (Frost Fever and Blood Plague, or Necrotic Plague, if you have chosen this talent) up at all times.
   - Apply Frost Fever or Necrotic Plague with Howling Blast, and apply Blood Plague with Outbreak or Plague Strike. Make sure to use Blood Plague with an Unholy rune, and not with a Death rune.

The principal difference was that when Ethan explained his Death Knight rotation to me he also qualified the priority based on the benefits it provided. Instead of just telling me that he used 'Frost Strike' and 'Obliterate' when the 'Killing Machine' proc was up as points 3 and 4 do in the Icy Veins account, he also explained that it gives these abilities 100% chance to strike critically, a critical strike doing twice as much damage as a standard hit. While Icy Veins supplies a list of actions players needed to undertake to master performance, Ethan reasoned that a Death Knight's abilities were better explained in terms of those which were most important for maximising damage output. Even so it's quite apparent that Icy Veins provided an almost one-to one guide for action and is taken as an unproblematic representation of the logic that went into the design of the character class. Icy Veins was not an interpretation of or an inferential 'guide' to Death Knight rotation, it was *the* Death Knight rotation stated in text rather than in code. The knowledge constructed by these websites was construed as an explicit textual expression of what was otherwise concealed and implicit in the coded

architecture of *World of Warcraft*. Significantly this knowledge was not just exegetical but provided a plan for performative action that was conceived as no less problematic than the relation between code and text.

2.7. Shadow Lord Iskar: Code and Codification

In this section I will explore the relationship between the knowledge produced in online *World of Warcraft* guides and the way performance was imagined and practiced through close analysis of how Helkpo raiders struggled and eventually overcame a raid boss named Shadow Lord Iskar through, or perhaps despite, persevering with a fixed approach to the encounter – the 'strategy' - that was in certain respects questionable.

Shadow Lord Iskar was a raid boss in the Hellfire Citadel raid dungeon that became available to players in late June 2015. He was the seventh boss in the dungeon and was the first in the wing known as 'The Bastion of Shadows'. Helkpo's raiders had been making relatively good progress through the first wing of the dungeon and guild leader Chris was confident that this streak could continue. As was often the case throughout its history, the guild at this time consisted of a core of committed members who had closer relationships, many of which continued outside the game, and a number of newer players whose relationships were realised principally through the game. The latter tended to be less committed and more likely to cease playing unexpectedly and one of the key goals for the core members of the guild was to continue to recruit new players to fill gaps in the roster when existing members, for whatever reason, decided they could not continue to play. In order to successfully recruit, Helkpo needed to demonstrate it was making progress through raid content so as to appeal to potential members who were interested in doing so. One of the benefits of raiding at this time was that Blizzard had designed raids around the concept of 'flexible raiding'. Where previously raids had either required ten players or twenty five players, a raid group could field any number between ten and thirty players and the difficulty would scale against the group's size. This meant that there was always a raid slot available for those who wished to raid without having to rotate players which Chris

hoped would prevent people leaving the guild if they felt they were getting too few opportunities to raid.

As was custom, prior to the first attempt at a raid boss, those participating had been instructed to watch the 'strategy video' on Youtube. Strategy videos were one of the most important player-produced resources for raiding and constituted an important element of raid preparation. They were usually high quality videos produced by hard-core raiding guilds that used footage from actual raiding sessions, often recorded from multiple angles and takes edited together to create a single narrative. These videos were narrated by one or more individuals who had participated in the raid who explained the encounter and the strategy they used to defeat raid bosses. During the period of my fieldwork the two most relied upon producers of these videos were Tankspot and Fatboss, both of whom had their own Youtube pages that hosted the videos. Although it was not considered essential, some players had also experienced the encounter on 'Looking For Raid' (LFR) difficulty which was seen as significantly more trivial compared to the 'Heroic' difficulty versions that Helkpo attempted because the raid boss had less health, did less damage and the fight excluded the most difficult mechanics. Both of these preparatory activities were carried out to familiarise players with the mechanics of the fight and provide some scope regarding the kinds of responses they were required to perform. It was not, however, expected that players would be able to defeat the boss on the first few attempts and players were aware of this before an encounter. After the first evening's attempts at Iskar, of which there were twenty two, Chris ended the raiding session with encouraging words – "Thanks guys. We all have a good idea of how Iskar works now, so next raid we should be able to get him down". Chris's confidence was always in part a ruse through which he expressed optimism and encouragement, yet there was no reason why Helkpo's raiders should have doubted him: raid encounters were designed to be difficult, but not impossible and the guides available presented the encounter as a series of mechanics employed by the raid boss in response to which players had to perform certain actions much like the class rotation guides discussed in the previous section. Yet it took the guild four weeks and 123 attempts to defeat Shadow Lord Iskar. Following the 21st wipe, one player joked that "drinking

a beer every time we wiped seemed like a good idea in the beginning". By the standards of the other raid bosses the number of attempts it took to defeat Iskar was excessive – it had up until this point taken Helkpo between fifteen and thirty in this particular raid dungeon. This was the cause of great frustration for all the raiders involved, who represented a fairly consistent group over this period of time. Chris was especially concerned that the guild's lack of progress would have a negative impact on new and potential recruits whose interest lay in completing content and acquiring improved gear.

My focus is on the relationship between strategy as a series of instructions for action and performance as an attempt to put those actions into practice. In this section then the focus is not just on the role of representation of knowledge forms but also that of 'human-computer interaction' - how designers and users imagine the kinds of actions necessary to produce desirable outcomes. Throughout Helkpo's attempts to defeat Iskar a contradiction arose between the expectations of strategy as a guaranteed method for success and its apparent failure in practice. The strategy, however, was seldom seen as the problem, the accusatory finger was pointed toward the inability of players to comply with the strategy proficiently. Failure was, as we have seen, located squarely in the realm of human subjects. The strategy the guild used was, as was normally the case constructed by Chris and another guild member, Clarif, who had a reputation as a highly accomplished and exacting player, from information from the Fatboss video guide, Icy Veins' guide and discussions on the official *World of Warcraft* forums. As far as Chris was concerned the strategy was the correct one. He made this quite clear in the raid sign-up section of Helkpo's forum before the second week of attempts at Iskar, his frustration at the raid team's lack of success was conspicuous even at this early stage:

> "Can people attempt to have prepared for Iskar please, I can't state enough how its 100% down to the individual, there is sadly nothing I can do with the strat[egy] to fix peoples inability to run fire backwards, run out for chakrams and throws the eye for winds. Everything is down to you… so come prepared/able to focus"

The strategy was essentially a series of instructions that described how players in a raid should respond to the mechanics employed in a boss fight. Prior to the first evening of raiding Chris had posted a set of 'quick' strategy guides to the guild's forum with the aim of making them comprehendible and easy to remember, which illustrates the basic form a strategy took:

Ground Phase

DPS / Healers / Tanks

Fel Chakram - Move away, avoid path

Fel Incineration - Chased by fire, boss moves up, fire moves back

Eye of Anzu

-- Phantasmal Wind - Throw eye of anzu to each member

--- Phantasmal Wounds - Throw to remove debuff or heal above 90%

Air Phase

Corrupted Priest

- Phantasmal Obliteration

-- Eye of Anzu thrown to healer, dispel FEL BOMB

Murder other adds

Focus Blast - Just stay stacked

Fel Incineration - move away / throw eye if you have it.

Air Phase #2 45%

Corrupted Priest

Shadow Fel Warder

Fel Conduit - Interupt (/w eye)

Air Phase #3 20%

Corrupted Priest

Shadow Fel Warder

Raven

phantasmal Corruption (Tank /w Eye)

Like many raid encounters, the fight against Iskar progressed through a number of stages - this example was punctuated by three short transitions described above as 'phases' – so the encounter went: stage one (Ground Phase), transition one (Air Phase), stage two (Ground Phase), transition two (Air Phase #2), stage three (Ground Phase), transition three (Air Phase #3) and stage four (Ground Phase) at the end of which the raid boss would be defeated. Stages one, two, three and four employed the same mechanics, while each transition added a predetermined variation to that which preceded it in which Iskar left combat by flying into the air and summoning additional monsters ('adds') that needed to be defeated as quickly as possible by the raid team, while dealing with the new mechanics they introduced. The percentile number next the 'Air Phase' number represented the amount of health Iskar would need to be reduced to in order to trigger the phase. Helkpo struggled with a number of mechanics during this encounter, but the one that proved most challenging revolved around 'The Eye of Anzu', referred to as 'the eye', an item that was picked up by one raid member at the beginning of the encounter and that at certain points had to be passed to other players. The 'eye' was, if not an entirely novel mechanic, an uncommon one which no doubt contributed to the problems

the raid group experienced. Besides 'The Eye of Anzu' there were a number of other mechanics that the raid group had to contend with. The most notable of these were: 'Fel Incineration' – a beam of green fire that targeted a player, then pursued them leaving a trail of flame on the ground that damaged any players who stood in it, and; 'Fel Chakram' a projectile that targeted a player, did damage to any players between Iskar and the targeted player and then exploded causing damage to anyone nearby the targeted player. As these mechanics illustrate, offensive attacks against players often impacted the group as a whole, not just the individual player. The 'eye' posed a slightly different set of problems. Throughout the encounter randomly selected players would be afflicted with a debuff called 'Fel Wounds' that caused damage over a period of time to these players. Possession of the 'eye' would clear this debuff from a player. The second mechanic was called 'Fel Winds' which targeted several players and would drive them out of the room one edge of which was a ledge with a fatal drop. Again, possession of the 'eye' would remove the effects of the 'Fel Wind'.

Raid strategies utilised the same non-syntactical and formal aesthetic of presentation as player resources and guides, as the example above shows. Chris and Clarif's strategy was in fact a highly condensed version of the guide found on Icy Veins. While to a certain degree, the mechanics, attacks, carried out by Iskar against raid members, and the architecture of the space in which it took place afforded a finite set of possible actions by players it was evident that initially the breadth of this range was also often too great for players. Contingency was produced not from entirely unpredictable mechanics, but from players being forced to make decisions about how to respond to the effects of multiple mechanics simultaneously as well as out of simple performative mistakes, such as moving out of the way of a dangerous attack too slowly. For example a player targeted by the 'Fel Incineration' mechanic might remember to run away from the beam of green flame, but the matter of where he or she ran to was less clear cut. Crucially running the 'wrong' way could jeopardise the entire raid group. On numerous occasions – I counted twenty three – the raid wiped because a player affected by the 'Phantasmal Wind' mechanic did not receive 'the eye' quickly enough and they were literally blown out of the room! What tended to happen, and this was not at all unusual in raids, was that a player

would concentrate their efforts on performing their class role – tanking, damage or healing – and would respond too late to a specific mechanic. Players repeatedly died at the hands of the Phantasmal Winds mechanic because players who had 'the eye' were not consistently throwing it to affected players fast enough. During the first two weeks of attempts Chris became increasingly exasperated by these performative failures. Following the third such failure in a row one evening, he sighed into Vent as players were making their way back to the encounter location. "Why did Ledeth fall off the edge?" there was a pause, followed by a sheepish reply from a player called Pytha, "Sorry" he started "I thought I had time to get the eye to him, but…" he trailed off. Chris continued "Passing the eye is *the* priority. *As soon as you get it you have to pass it or people will die*." "Okay, sorry" Pytha continued "I thought I had time, I was trying to focus on doing damage…" "It's not about doing damage, save that for the air phases. Okay let's try again. We just need to get bits like that fixed and we'll be fine" Chris finished. Throughout the 123 attempts it took the raid group to defeat Iskar this situation occurred again and again, even when it appeared that the guild was experiencing an upward learning curve the same problems might suddenly begin again for no explicable reason. Despite this, the strategy elucidated by Chris remained virtually the only approach the guild attempted to apply to the encounter.

In terms of human-computer interaction this perspective runs somewhat counter to the received wisdom found in the work of Lucy Suchman (2007). In her deeply insightful study in *Human-Machine Reconfigurations*, Suchman attempts to elucidate the particularities of the relationship between what she terms 'plans' and 'situated actions' in response to what she saw as the reliance of designers of artificial intelligence and other forms of 'interactive' machines on the former to shape the development of their responsiveness, a perspective she locates in the developments in cognitive science in the early 20th century where the mind was conceptualised as an abstractable structure – a "preconceived cognitive schema" (2007: 176) - capable of being relocated into other things (ibid: 36). In this understanding an, admittedly simplified, distinction between 'plans' and 'situated action, can be glossed as the pre-determined and determining rationalised set of actions that constitute plans

versus the emergent, improvisational and open-ended moment-by-moment interactions of situated action. Suchman has clarified that plans and situated actions are not as dichotomous in practice as they are when presented as analytic units. Plans she states "open out onto a sphere of embodied action and lived experience that extends always beyond their bounds and at the same time gives them their sense of efficacy" (ibid: 21) yet she holds to the view that plans "neither determine the actual course of situated action nor adequately reconstruct it" (ibid: 27).

From an analytical perspective Suchman's argument stands: Chris and Clarif's strategy was a "discursive [artifact] through which rational accountability [was] achieved" (Suchman 2007: 27) and its reification as a predictive means to an end was more readily accounted for after the fact; in practice the performance of Helkpo's raiders was highly sensitive to the moment-by-moment experiences the encounter produced, even if these actions were at the very least informed by the strategy. There is no question that Suchman's argument is sophisticated as it is valid, yet by concentrating only on action, the power of plans, or at least their potential power, and the relationship they have with the imagination is given short shrift. In Monique Nuijten's study of the Mexican *ejidatarios,* engagement with the bureaucratic structures of the state 'hope' and 'belief' in the "rationality of formal procedures" (2003: 159) sustained their endeavours to reclaim land even in the face of repeated failure. For raiders in *World of Warcraft* an analogous claim can be made for the value of 'strategy'. Following the first defeat of Iskar and on subsequent boss fights, Iskar became a reflection point for the problems of the inconsistency players experienced when it came to executing responses to mechanics. Following the successful defeat of a subsequent raid boss, Fel Lord Zakuun, in a single evening after only 20 wipes the raid group was feeling buoyed and confident. The 'kill' was felt to be the correct balance of failure and success. At the end of the evening the following exchange took place on Ventrilo, initiated by Spryte who was leading the raid that evening. After congratulating the raid group for the successful 'kill', she continued:

Spryte: "it took 2 hours but that was better than we did on Iskar, for example, because *that* took a lot of time"

Haulo: "Iskar took about 4 weeks"

Tom: "Iskar took way longer than it ever should have done for human beings with co-ordination to do"

Spryte: "And it was so stupid because when we got it down it was like it's nothing for me to tank that third phase now – interrupting and taunting and everything – it's so easy now, but it's just not when you haven't got the kill yet"

This short, but meaningful excerpt of conversation conveys the discursive tendency to locate failure in the performance of players. Read literally Tom's statement could be read to the contrary, but the written word fails to express the deep sarcasm with which his words were uttered, a not unusual trope for Tom to employ. His reference to 'human beings with co-ordination' is a criticism of the raiders, the implication being that they did possess the capacity to perform competently but during the Iskar encounter failed to realise this potential. The final comment by Spryte also suggests that players recognised that it was easier to attribute success to strategy after its efficacy had been demonstrated, yet at the same time she is also clearly critical of her own performance prior to her successful mastery of it. A given strategy did not necessarily go unquestioned. On the one occasion where a different strategy was used Spryte and Tom, who were responsible for tanking Iskar and the additional adds he spawned, suggested an alternative that Chris let them try out. Following the first week of failures one of the main problems was believed to be that the group was killing the additional monsters that appeared in each phase (Corrupted Talonpriest, Shadowfen Warden etc.) in the wrong order, so the priority of kills was altered. This was the outcome of a conversation that took place in between failed attempts between the two tanks and Chris, because at this time the damage-dealing players in the raid were struggling to kill all these additional enemies before the phase ended and Tom and Spryte

were struggling to deal with the extra damage they dealt over this prolonged period of the encounter. However one week and 25 wipes later it was decided between these three players that it was better to return to the original order which was the strategy that the guild finally used to defeat Iskar.

The need for a strategy however, was not questioned. This was at least partly because over the years Blizzard had designed raid encounters to be more complex, most likely in response to the emergence of player-produced strategies in the first place (see Chapter 4), but it was evident that a strategy was imagined as a rationalised plan for collective action that once mastered would lead to success and become routinized (Chen 2009), but it required commitment to the strategy in order that it be mastered. The decision to adopt a variation on the strategy was a consequence of the inability of the DPS players to do enough damage. Strategy then was a transformative mediation of raid encounters. The difficulty of raid encounters stemmed from two factors: the level of complexity of the mechanics and the damage the mechanics inflicted on players. Damage could always be mitigated to a certain extent by the level of gear raiders were equipped with – better gear meant that players could absorb more damage before dying and it also meant that players did more damage thus ending encounters more rapidly and that healers did more healing further reducing the chances of death. Encounters without complex mechanics were often described as 'tank and spank' meaning that they required little in the way of planning or attention to anything other than doing damage to the boss, or 'gear checks', which referred the importance of gear as a measure of survivability. Iskar was considered a complex fight that required players to respond to numerous mechanics and Chris wanted to ensure that the strategy he constructed reduced this complexity as much as possible. More significantly strategy should also be seen an expression and articulation of *World of Warcraft* as a transparent and legible system.

Complexity was conceived as a source of contingency in raid encounters which affected the facility of players to follow strategy. The production of strategy was reflexively designed to reduce the complexity of encounters through performance by a series of instructions that imagined to be

followed to the letter. The dual effect of the strategy was to produce a simplified account of the encounter that was cognitively digestible and performatively unambiguous. Success that was deemed the outcome of adherence to strategy, as opposed to say 'luck' or the game 'bugging', was referred to as 'knowing' the encounter. Knowledge in this sense was not just something that took exegetical form, but crucially was performative. It is arguable that in the end the successful defeat of Iskar was achieved through a combination of repetition and gradual improvements in gear that raiders acquired over the four week period it took to overcome the encounter and from that perspective we may credit strategy as functioning in the manner described by Suchman - as a resource players used reflexively to shape practice in response to contingent-laden environmental conditions – if we take the view that practice is an *a priori* form of social action in relation to structures of meaning. The dogmatic adherence to the strategy, despite plenty of evidence for its empirical failure, however suggests that practice and meaning were more dialectically commensurate – the belief that the strategy would at some point demonstrate its efficacy once the players 'got it right'. The answer I believe is to be found firstly in the term used by Suchman to describe plans - "computationally encoded control structures" (2007: 21). Chris's presentation of the strategy was on the one hand a form of codification – a non-syntactical, highly simplified set of instructions and on the other alluded to the conditionals of binary code, e.g. if *x* occurs, then do *y*. The rhetorical structure of strategy, as with many of the resources of *World of Warcraft*, precluded discursive intelligibility: it stated instructions and commands and this, as I've demonstrated, contributed to its status as a window on *World of Warcraft*'s architecture, a culturally constructed codification naturalised by its supposed isomorphic relationship with the game's design. Given this, the importance of adherence to strategy in performance should be understood as the reproduction of the legitimation of the social rules as uncomplicatedly related to the coded rules. Another way to explain this is: if an alternative strategy had been proven more successful it may have put into question the relationship between the textual 'social' rules and the coded 'architectural rules'.

In the context of performance the integrity of social rules were always at risk. *World of Warcraft*'s 'system of meaning' (Sahlins 1985) was constructed beyond the game's boundaries therefore it was quite frangible and liable to perforation in practice. Players might use this system of resources as a means to make claims about the game and what counted as appropriate or inappropriate, but in the absence of a centralised institution capable of enforcing this set of codified rules, it required commitment to establish these rules and the empirical demonstration of their efficacy in performance. Performative failure was problematic in *World of Warcraft* because it could represent a challenge to the tenuous relationship the explicit social rules had with the opaque architectural rules. If new performative practices had the potential to transform the system of meaning in some way, then the idealisation of performance structured in the form of code should be seen as an attempt to reduce the risk this posed. Contra Suchman, strategy was determinate in the sense that whether or not successful outcomes were produced by the improvisational responses of players to moment-by-moment changes in the game environment, the strategy was deemed to be the source of successful outcomes.

2.8. The Asymmetry of Rules

One of the observations Suchman makes in her study of human and machine interaction is that a noticeable degree of asymmetry exists between the two entities in the process of interaction (2007). While humans may struggle to operate machines, machines themselves suffered from a much greater obliviousness to what was going on around them and lacked the resources that humans could call upon to negotiate a resolution. The machines that interest Suchman were quite different from that of *World of Warcraft*. The photocopiers whose use she analysed were designed to pose no challenge to those who wished to use them. *World of Warcraft* on the other hand, like many digital games was designed to pose challenges to players in many functions of its design. The asymmetry experienced by machines "due to a disparity in their relative access to the moment-by-moment contingencies that constitute the conditions of situated interaction" (ibid: 183) were somewhat reversed *in World of*

Warcraft. Although there were ways in which Blizzard desired predictable outcomes for the game – such as understanding the basic mechanics of combat, location of information and resources through the user-interface and so on – the encounters were intended to pose some challenge and this was achieved through intentionally limited responsiveness to the actions that players performed. To describe it another way, some of the actions players carried out were purposefully designed to have no state-changing outcomes. In *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* (2010), Bonnie Nardi's ethnography of *World of Warcraft*, she considers the nature of this asymmetry in relation to what she terms 'the rules'.

Nardi establishes her argument by recognising the constraining conditions of the game's architecture and is critical of academic commentaries that attribute positive status only to the 'emergent' practices of players for whom rules represent constraints in an exclusively pejorative sense. Instead she argues that undue attention has been bestowed on the agency of people at the expense of rules, which for *World of Warcraft* and similar games are, in actuality, the primary form of agency and that therefore deserve greater critical consideration. Rules, she posits, are not obstructions to the performances of players but "a potential resource rather than a hindrance to positive human activity" (ibid: 67). This way of thinking about *World of Warcraft* hinges on the asymmetry between the effect of rules and the actions of players and has several consequences. The first is that scholars should analyse games as objects in and of themselves as well as the practices of those who play them. The second is that we should entertain the possibility that rules – a game's design - have a positive role because players actually take pleasure in engaging with the game as it is intended to be played. Thirdly then rules can be seen as "resources for preserving good design" (ibid: 74) in other words the constraints that prevent players altering the rules or performing acts outside of the constraints of the rules can be understood as having a positive function because they preserve the integrity of the 'well-designed' artifact. On this point Nardi refers to the virtual world *Second Life* as a counter example. As a significantly more open-ended experience where players were responsible for creating the majority

of the content she argues that it produced a much less engaging experience because it lacked the overarching qualities of good design. In sum her argument is that:

> "digital rules provide a special kind of resource with which good design can be preserved and protected through encapsulation in the black box. In this sense rules may nurture by providing a safe haven for cultural objects of integrity and excellence. I see the design encapsulated in the rules of *World of Warcraft* as a work of art – one that gives rise to participatory aesthetic experience and community" (ibid: 79)

Nardi does not provide a detailed account of what she means by the rules, but I think it's fair to say that she refers to what I described as its 'architecture' following Thomas Malaby's usage (2009) as she gives little attention to the role of player-produced content that existed beyond the boundaries of the game itself. This was in part a consequence of the state of the game at the time of her fieldwork which was, as discussed in the introductory chapter, going through a period of 'interpretive flexibility' (Pinch and Bijker 2012) where the use of player-created online resources was less ubiquitous and less normative. Yet this transformation does point to the way in which any analysis of rules in games or indeed any digital artifacts must account for more than just the architectural form as embodied in the software. Although the wider claims of Nardi's arguments still hold - that there was an asymmetrical relationship between software and players in which the players were in many ways constrained by what was made possible by the game's architecture and that this architecture was utilised as a "resource for good design" in practice - there is a presumption that the "mechanical enforcement of rules" (Nardi 2010: 61) produced conditions in which this was a foregone conclusion. The argument against the 'tyranny of the subject' (Miller 2005) in the social sciences where the actions of human agents may be uncritically posited as prior to the agentive capacities of things is a valid position, but there is a danger that arguments to the contrary just reverse the asymmetry. What I observed was that the status of the rules of *World of Warcraft*, both architectural and social, were an accomplishment not a given – their efficacy, the hold they had on the collective imaginations and

performative practices of players was a consequence of their engagement with the rules not the motivating energy for their engagement.

At this juncture it would normally be appropriate to provide a hypothetical counter-example that illustrated an alternative form of engagement with the rules, fortunately this is not necessary as a very niche but collective practice in *World of Warcraft* did just that. There existed a small number of players who undertook 'roleplaying' in a manner not entirely different from that described for *DCC* at the beginning of this chapter. These players developed backgrounds, personalities and character descriptions that produced a much broader array of meanings than the game's rules provided for and this was achieved largely by ignoring the injunctions of the game's design. The few role-players I spoke to undertook to perform the mundane social practices that an everyday inhabitant of the game's setting might experience. One of the key conventions that pertained for role-players was "you are not special" an enjoinder that subverted the genre trope that informed the narrative core of the game in which the advancement of players in terms of game mechanics was matched by increasingly greater threats to the cosmic balance of good and evil. These players performed something more akin to the matters that have informed the traditional subject of ethnography – daily affairs, kinship, life and death, the changing of the seasons and so on. This practice introduced a new set of risks incumbent on the genre – there were roleplaying rules that although evidently not a part of the game's architecture, were subject to normative censure – and risks that arose from the activities around which the game was designed. One such risk, for example, was from players of the opposing faction that on Roleplay Player vs Player servers could attack and kill those of the opposing faction. When I asked one of the role-players I interviewed about this he explained to me that a player killed by another player would be expected to frame the experience in roleplaying terms: "he'd have to say that he had been mortally wounded and use the 'yell' channel [the in-game form of 'shouting'] to call for help and then another player would have to come along and heal him". In order to achieve this role-players often used addons through which they could embellish their characters with more physical and biographical detail than was otherwise possible. In much the same way that the rules in

DCC could be open-ended in terms of the meanings participants produced, the same was true for the architecture of *World of Warcraft* for role-players.

Given the roots of MMOs such as *WoW* in the pen and paper role-playing game genre, one might have expected this to have been more commonplace, but for the majority of players those who chose to role-play were viewed with a mixture of amusement and bewilderment, affectionately so or otherwise. Although this changes little about the 'empirical facts' of *World of Warcraft*'s architecture as it were, what it does demonstrate is that the 'dominance' of the rules was a cultural accomplishment, a contingent outcome of particular forms of player negotiation and not a foregone conclusion and that it had to be established and re-established in response to the behaviour of players and the changes made to the game's design. Furthermore, it points to a cultural complicity between players and the game's architecture and the enduring power of the norms that produced this complicity

2.9. Addons: The Aesthetics of Rules

In the concluding section of this chapter, I want to pose a final challenge to any simplistic assumptions about the relationship between the game's architecture and its representation in player-produced knowledge forms. My starting point is Alex Golub's exceptional paper on the way raiders in *World of Warcraft* transform a 'world' into a database (2010). Golub's argument proceeds from a critique of how the compelling nature of 'virtual worlds' has conventionally been attributed to their immersive qualities that as 'simulations' engage players through their sensorial realism. In contrast to this supposition he contends that raiders in *World of Warcraft* immerse themselves in activities of collective knowledge production that reduce the sense of realism of the game by 'decomposing' the game world and presenting it as something more akin to a rationalised database. Golub's paper was deeply inspiring for my own understanding of the practices of the players I encountered in my fieldwork and indeed my own gaming practices as a researcher yet the motivation for his paper differs

somewhat from my own and in doing so I feel makes some of the same assumptions that Nardi does in regards to the relationship between architecture and player produced knowledge.

My concern can be summed up by scrutinising the perhaps unintentional language Golub uses in the following paragraphs:

> "Raiding (large-scale set piece battles between a team of twenty-five players and computer-controlled monsters called "bosses") requires players to overcome contingency-filled encounters through coordinated action. In order to "down" (kill) bosses effectively, raiders *decompose* the realistic visual and audio fields of the game into simpler models of the *underlying game state*, creating useful forms of knowledge" (2010: 19) (my emphases)

and;

> "Raiders become committed to the collective project of raiding, I argue, and this structure of care in turn leads to a proliferation of sociotechnical systems which *break down* the graphical realism of the game and create forms of knowledge. It is this commitment to the group project of raiding, rather than sensorial immersion in virtual worlds, which is the true cause of the remarkable dedication of the raiders" (ibid: 20) (my emphasis)

The use of the terms 'decompose', 'breakdown' and 'underlying game state' is what interests me here. The form in which player-created knowledge is most often discussed by Golub is the 'addon', the material representation of which was typically a panel visible in the game's user interface, which, he rightly notes, could actually obscure a player's view of the game world by appearing to hover over the 'view in' in some way (Figure 1). Golub evokes a particular kind of process through his use of the terms 'decompose' and 'breakdown' - metaphors that allude to the breakdown of external surfaces revealing the internal workings and structures, rather like the appearance of bones jutting through the thinning

flesh of a cadaver. Metaphors are not descriptive of one-to-one relationships, they operate through

the relation of parts to wholes (Tilley 1999), addons obviously did not literally 'decompose' the game

world. Equally the metaphors he chose to use point to the kinds of relationship he conceptualises

between *World of Warcraft*'s architecture and the information produced by addons where the

'underlying game state' is unproblematically made legible. Another appropriate metaphor he could

have used, given the form addons tended to take, might describe them as 'windows onto the

underlying game state'.

Golub explains that the knowledge produced by addons was 'simpler' than that of the actual game,

but is somehow nonetheless the 'same' which begs the question how something can be two

contradictory things at the same time. Even if we were to take for granted some kind of direct causal

relationship between part of the game's architecture and the information produced by addons, it

would be difficult to justify this as entirely commensurate. Simplification in any event must have some

kind of transformative effect. The claims for the imminent isomorphism between the game's code and

the information shown by addons were proposed by players – official comments from Blizzard on the

subject of addons tended to be restricted to those that were seen to contravene the end user license

agreement – and even then they did not go unchallenged. To close this chapter I intend to offer an

alternative analytic assumption that begins from the position that the knowledge presented by addons

was not 'the same' and that while the game architecture operated in a 'black box', social rules as

player-produced media constituted a cultural scheme whose meaningfulness extended beyond the

representation of game architecture. From this perspective, addons possess an ambiguous and

shifting state between transparent window and a further layer of opaque surface (Friedberg 2006).

In asserting that what was visible for players through the game's interface possessed only an arbitrary

relationship with its architecture without tangible evidence to demonstrate this is the case, there is a

danger the argument will proceed on the basis of conjecture alone. However, there is evidence that

the developers of *World of Warcraft* experienced similar issues around the meaning of what was visible on the interface and its indexical coded counterpart. Blizzard's developers were confronted with a comparable problem concerning the aesthetic form that the damage players did took when made visible on screen in the form of numbers. It must be stated that the relationship between the visual representation of the game's system and the numbers that appeared on a player's screen will have had a more immediate relationship as the number ranges given in the database will have been commensurate with those appearing on player's screens. But in this instance the reason Blizzard's designers chose those particular numbers was because they were considered to be meaningful to players, what they did not consider was how this choice could affect the game's architecture and its performance more widely. In November 2011 shortly after the announcement of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion at that year's Blizzcon, a 'Dev Watercooler' blog post written by Greg 'Ghostcrawler' Street was published on the official *World of Warcraft* website titled 'the Great Item Squish (or Not) of Pandaria'[6]. The topic of this post was, in essence, number inflation in the game. The issue was that in order to give players a sense of increased achievement and power with the release of each new expansion pack, the numbers that measured and represented a player's power – through attacks/heals and statistics - had been increased to reflect this. As 'Ghostcrawler' put it "upgrading from a chestpiece that has 50 Strength into one that has 51 Strength is undeniably a DPS increase for the appropriate user, *but it's not a very exciting reward*" (my emphasis). The numbers then were an aesthetic signifier of potency rather than anything inherently necessary for the game mechanics themselves. The other issue, focused on only tangentially was more commercially oriented - that without these numerically salient characteristics the designers believed that players would skip "over tiers of gear or entire levels of content". One of the primary concerns for Blizzard was that by this point in the game's history players were able to progress through content at a faster rate than they

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[6] http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/3885585

had previously and this meant that many stopped playing sooner and this put greater pressure on Blizzard to develop more content to retain players.

Looking ahead to the next expansion, the developers hypothesised that given the current trend for number inflation, the numbers would, in their words, only become even more 'ridiculous'. They illustrated this by comparing stat inflation on items as might be found in the up and coming expansion and its successor (the former including a stat increase of 2569 and the latter including a stat increase 10484). We might tend to think of numbers as too abstract or objective to be attributed such a term, but anthropologists have noted that numbers are often ascribed qualitative features such as 'personality' (e.g. Zaloom 2006). 'Ghostcrawler' described this as 'a weird situation' a description that makes sense only in the context of the original numerical scores from the initial release of *World of Warcraft* in 2004. The highest tier of gear available in this version of the game was called Tier 3 and the stat increases for this tier ranged from numbers in the mid-teens to numbers in the mid-thirties. So part of the 'ridiculousness' of number inflation was its relation to what had come before.

However, one of the primary concerns was the burden number inflation might have on the physicality of computers, that "PCs just can't quickly perform math on very large numbers". Here we see how the volume of numbers was seen to have an impact on the physical capacities of computing and drew attention to how this would affect player experience of the game. When the blog post was written the developers had not yet settled on a solution to number inflation, but a couple of ideas were suggested and discussed. The first was called 'mega damage' and the principal aim of this idea was to make the amount of damage easier to see on the screen – every time damage was dealt or received a number would appear on screen before floating up and fading away. The idea here was to compress zeros and then render them visible in textual form so that 1000s would be shown as 'ks' and 100,0000s as 'ms'. Alternatively more descriptive language was suggested so damage in the hundreds and thousands would be seen on screen as 'mega damage', lending a less ambiguous qualitative description to a numerical amount. The problem with this solution was that it would not remove the need for the

computer to calculate the damage, it would simply present the outcome of the calculation in a different form on the screen. With this in mind the second idea was called 'item level squish' and was based around the idea of reducing the numbers absolutely not just representationally, they explained that "If we can lower stats on items, then we can lower every other number in the game as well". In this case the developers would reduce the statistical increases of all items in the game to a lower percentage such that items would still be proportionately better or worse but the absolute numbers would be significantly lower. Their concern about this solution was that players would feel less powerful than they had felt prior to the 'squish'.

What this developer issue demonstrates is the difficulty of asserting any kind of oversimplified relationship between what appeared on a player's interface and the invisible computing processes. For example, the situation that precipitated the need to consider an 'item squish' in the first place forces us to question any preconceived notion that the direction of causation runs from code to representation. It was the designer's ideas about what they thought would make players feel powerful that determined what values were input into the database, not the other way round. The developers expressed genuine concern about what it would mean to represent large decimal units in textual form and were conscious of the potential transformative process this could have on the meaning of the numbers in the database: in other words, if '1000s' were represented as 'k's' would they be 'the same'? This is the question that illuminates my understanding of the relationship between what was visible on-screen and what was not visible in the game's architecture.

Within the academic work on *World of Warcraft* addons have become the subject of significant interest that connects with and problematizes many of the concerns of academics in relation to emergent practices and forms of surveillance and disciplinary technologies (see Taylor 2006, Nardi 2010, besides Golub 2010), but the aesthetics of player interfaces into which addons were composed has been largely overlooked. The existence of addons is taken to mean that their presence is a given and the attention directed to the surveilling uses of addons has ignored how they are used to produce

meaning as part of a design whole. Here I borrow use of the term 'aesthetics' from Riles where she employed it as a key analytic device in examination of the document-producing practices of Fijian women's activist NGOs (2001). Riles was also concerned with the relationship between information and its presentation and the ways that design could affect engagement with information, sometimes even supplanting the presence of information entirely. In her study, activism frequently ceased to be about affecting change directly and became instead a highly mediated process through which ideas were communicated and then acted upon by the recipients of this media, as such the capacity for aesthetics to create action more effectively than information became the primary subject of interest amongst many activists (2001: 130). In *World of Warcraft*, the presence of information for players could be just as problematic and addons that helped players conceal or aestheticise information were as popular as those that produced it.

Figure 1 shows the way a default user-interface might appear to players when they created a character at level 1. There are no addons in use and the interface had not been modified in any way. The game

Figure 1: Unmodified World of Warcraft UI

world monopolises the screen and the interface elements are restricted to a 'bar' of 'action buttons' at the bottom centre of the screen, a 'mini-map' at the top right of the screen, the character image and health/resources bar in the top left corner and the chat pane that is just about visible as a

transparent grey rectangle with yellow icons on its right border at the bottom left of the screen. Other panels could be 'opened' to access features such as the 'spell book' or 'character profile' but these were usually 'shut' when not in use. In public discourses within the game, an interface that looked like this, particularly for a character at maximum or higher level was considered to be performatively suspect – evidence that a player did not really 'understand' the game. The absence of addons, especially those that allowed manipulation of the 'toolbar/s' (centre bottom of the screen), was often viewed as a debilitating absence of knowledge. On the guild forum a thread was started exclusively for the discussion of the user interface and addons, including lists of addons players deemed essential.

Given this it might be assumed that the presence of addons would be a prominent component of guild member's interfaces. For example figure 2 shows the interface setup one of Helkpo's guild leaders, Harry. Here much of the view of the game world is obscured. The use of addons is detectable through the large panels that dominate the middle to bottom right and middle left of the screen. The rectangle made up of different coloured bars on the mid-right of the screen is the interface panel for an addon called Skada that displays numerical information about the damage players had done in the most recent group he had played with and at that point in time had little functional value. The panels above and below this one are the interface components for Killerpet's Raid Roller and Omen respectively, neither of which display any information. At the time he shared this screenshot with me, Harry complained that his "visible area is like a tiny circle" and he was reluctant to let other guild members see it. Harry had stopped raiding and had turned off an 'addon' called Bartender that meant players could rearrange all the bars on their interface and when he had done this the main 'action bars' visible along the bottom and up the right side default back to the standard interface. Harry's interface was deemed to be a cluttered and poor attempt. At this time various players had made suggestions to him about how he could improve his interface – including buying a larger monitor and reducing the size of the buttons so as to leave more room for the 'view' of the game world. Jewlz described it as "beyond cluttered and into madness!"

Figure 2: Very cluttered World of Warcraft UI

Although noticeably less cluttered than Harry's interface in figure 1, Jewlz' interface in figure 3 was also subject to criticism. Jewlz also used the Bartender addon and this meant he was able to move and re-shape the toolbars so that a lot of his ability buttons were compressed into the bottom middle of the screen. He also has two 'chat' panels visible (bottom left and bottom right) that separated the chat that went on during a raid from that which was occurring more generally in the game. The benefit of this separation of information was that it helped him focus on important raid chat which would otherwise have been interspersed with chat from the rest of the game world meaning that he might miss important lines of conversation. But it also created a neat sense of symmetry that is lacking in Harry's interface. This horizontal order is also reflected in a vertical sense of order between the game world in the top ¾s of the screen and the interface elements in the bottom ¼ of the screen. The aesthetic is only slightly interrupted by the presence of the panel for an addon called Recount that

fulfilled a similar role to Skada, just above the black chat panel on the right. Yet Jewlz was frustrated by his need to have so many 'action buttons' visible at the bottom of his screen and other players who saw his screen made comments to the effect that there were many action buttons that he didn't need.

Figure 3: Slightly cluttered World of Warcraft UI

As well as something viewed as a normatively indispensable component of a user interface, information was always potentially a piece of clutter that could upset the balance and harmony of a player's screen that had to be removed, hidden or made aesthetically compatible. In the interfaces of Harry and Jewlz information had got out of their control and represented a performative problem in as much as the relationship between information and performance was conceived as a matter of

Figure 4: Division of screen World of Warcraft UI

putting the former into practice through the latter. As the examination of the Shadow Lord Iskar raid encounter illustrated, the information contained in strategy should be put into action without the necessity of constantly having to return back to the media of information.

Figure 4 shows how Eric organised his interface. Eric was considered by many to be one of, if not the most proficient players in the guild and he committed a great deal of his time to perfecting his performance in every respect. He was one of the few guild members who consistently used detailed analytics to assess raid performances which he viewed on a second monitor rather than on the same screen that the game was played on. His interface repeats a similar division of the screen into game world and information, but does so in an even more streamlined form. Here elements like the 'mini-

map' usually found in the top right corner and the Recount addon have been incorporated into the information section of the screen. Interface features such as the 'raid frames' (left above the black text box) stray somewhat outside the information section, but have been re-positioned horizontally to echo the horizontal direction axis of the main body of information. At the centre bottom of the screen Eric's action buttons are visible but are more orderly than was the case for Jewlz's interface, maintaining an overall sense of order. The only area where information really cuts into the game world part of the screen is at the top right where icons and timings for Eric's character's 'buffs' are visible. Even so Eric had made an effort to minimise their impact by reducing the size of these icons and mirroring the edge and top of the screen complete with a right angle bend. He described the addon he used for this scheme, EBSF, as a "real pain in the arse" to set up, but persevered nonetheless in order to get the look he desired. Just as important as the structure of Eric's layout was the 'style' he chose which dispensed with the skeuomorphic flourishes evident on the toolbar, mini-map and character portrait frames of the default interface and replaced them with a flat, geometric style. The 'rounded' effect was also removed from the corners of the rectangular panels and flat, pastel colours replaced the brighter colours of the original interface.

Eric's interface was considered a much more proficient accomplishment by other players and helps clarify two points. The first is that far from 'decomposing' the game world, players viewed addons as part of the informational structure of the player interface and therefore as something that needed to be separated from the game world. Players strove to maintain the integrity of the game world by attempting to create discrete boundaries between it and information and significantly this boundary favoured the dominance of the game world as the performative space. The second concerns the sense of order that these favoured aesthetics employed and its relationship to concepts embodied in modernist ideologies. An accusation James C. Scott levels at the employment of organising and simplifying techniques by state bureaucracies was that the driving force behind their implementation of high modernism was often purely aesthetic (1998). In this imaginary, he explains that the straight lines and "formal, geometric simplicity" of everything from forest management to the creation of cities

were preconditions for efficiency. Le Corbusier, one of the master architects of the modernist vision, is described as possessing an aesthetic ideology in which "The visual, aesthetic component of his bold plans was central. Clean, smooth lines were something he associated with the "all-business" leanness of the machine" (1998: 117). At the same time he notes that the power of these techniques is not necessarily directly linked to their efficacy in practice, but that in the abstracted and simplified representations they produce "new social truths" (ibid: 77).

The tropes of modernism were evoked in the language used by players to describe the desired aesthetics of the interface, such as 'clean' and 'minimalist', that invoke a sense of order and efficiency that was deemed to be self-evident in the aesthetic design of the interface and like Le Corbusier's allusions to the leanness of machinery, reflected the systematic and transparent conceptions attributed to the game. The apotheosis of these notions as far as interfaces were concerned was the negation of almost all clutter, including information-providing media as figure 5 illustrates.

Figure 5: Minimalist World of Warcraft UI

This screenshot showed Chris's interface which was self-consciously described as a "minimalist UI". Informational aspects in Chris's UI have been reduced in size, moved to the peripheries of the screen

or made invisible until required in combat encounters. There has been a purge of interface buttons deemed unnecessary and even the borders on the character portraits in the top left corner have been made transparent. The only overt element of design is the use of an addon called Sexymaps to produce a translucent 'sci-fi' style border around the mini-map in the top right hand corner. In almost direct contradiction of Golub's claims, Chris and other Helkpo members sought not to decompose the game world but to recompose their interfaces so that the balance of informational elements and performative space drew attention to themselves at the appropriate moments. This is not to detract from Golub's claims regarding the collective knowledge-making practices of players but to argue that knowledge itself was made through and mediated by aesthetic practices that were considered to be performatively proficient. The game's interface was the only mediating form through which players could access the game world, so while knowledge of the game's system was created and located beyond its boundaries at other sites and even on other screens, the game world needed to be constructed as a discrete form in order to retain its integrity and informational elements of the interface were only present when they were required to master performance in the game world. Ultimately, the game world was where the action in performance was located and where player subjectivities were most prone to failure. The interface then was charged with capturing the systematic orderliness of class rotations and raid strategies that were key to transforming fallible subjects into masterful players in an aesthetic form devoid of unnecessary obstacles to proficient performance.

2.10. The Negation of 'Deep Play'

The aesthetic and symbolic division between the 'world' and the 'interface' fulfilled one other significant role – it helped players maintain a sense of agency against the tendency for games to 'carry away' those who played them; to be 'caught up'. Like many videogames, *World of Warcraft* was often charged with the possession of an addictive quality. During my fieldwork it was not uncommon for the media to run stories that focussed on individuals who were diagnosed in some way as addicted to the game and organisations were set up to deal specifically with the problem. During its early years *World*

of Warcraft was humorously referred to by some players as '*World of Warcrack*' and in 2007 the US animated comedy television show *South Park* ran an episode titled '*Make Love, Not Warcraft*' which featured characters who displayed characteristics typically attributed to addiction. In her study, Nardi dedicates a short chapter to the subject of addiction, in which she questions the moral frames through which the term is articulated – how it is used not to describe behaviour but specific behaviours in relation to specific objects (2010). She even goes so far as to suggest that players may go to some lengths to achieve a state of 'addiction' which privileges agency as the driving factor, a clever reversal of the convention. A contrasting argument is provided by Stromberg in his book *Caught Up in Play* (2009). His argument is concerned with the effects of 'entertainment', which he sees broadly as "playful activity undertaken for its own sake, in pursuit of pleasure that diverts the player from the day-to-day" (ibid: 7) which develops some interesting ideas, such as the notion that ritual and play are related forms for the production and expression of ideals and values at collective levels, but the former acknowledges those that society deems important, while the latter is its inverse that acknowledges those less worthy of admiration. As complimentary forms, both play and ritual enable powerful transcendent states of commitment in which people become caught up. Stromberg's apprehension stems from the consequence that play, he claims, offers 'improvements' on reality that has the tendency to make people prone to dissatisfaction with their lives and prefer the realm of play over that of their 'real' lives, a relinquishment of agency.

Nardi and Stromberg offer differing perspectives on the relationship between play and immersive states in which agency is in some way compromised, whether intentionally or otherwise. These discourses were not exclusive to academia, players did express concern about the 'addictive' qualities of games, although the term itself was shot through with ambivalence. Hari, for example, used the term to describe the qualities of the game he found engaging and expressed disappointment when he felt that they were missing. However, he made the decision to stop playing after his daughter was born, but occasionally felt tempted to return. What prevented him from doing so was that he feared that its addictive qualities might distract from his new parental responsibilities. Several people told

me that they were at first reluctant to play *World of Warcraft* because they had heard rumours about these qualities and, sadly, two guild members recounted stories to me in which they felt their inability to stop playing impacted their lives in negative ways. Becoming 'caught up' was then a genuine anxiety, but unlike Stromberg's account this had little to do with the 'fantasy' setting of the game – players did not, in most cases, experience a world that dramatically 'improved' upon the one they participated in outside the game. The locus for the loss of agency was to be found in the structure of the game's architecture which was charged with the power to compel play against the wishes of a player such that it was experienced as the loss of control. One of the most evocative descriptions of this kind of engagement with games can be found in Natasha Dow Schüll's ethnography of gambling machines in Las Vegas (2012). In this account players of electronic gambling machines found and sought a complete loss of agency in what they called 'the zone' in which time, space, monetary value and social role could be temporarily suspended. The gambling machine's role was to provide a "reliable mechanism for securing a zone of insulation from a 'human world'" (ibid: 13). The process supplied by these machines was that of 'continued play', the mechanical rhythm of which produced the experiential capacities for suspension of time, space and identity, and the more seamless continuity of play was experienced, the more easily entry i to the zone was facilitated. For players of these machines it was not, therefore, the "chance of winning to which they become addicted, but rather the world-dissolving state of subjective suspension and affective calm they derive from machine play" (ibid: 19). At the extreme 'the zone' was experienced as a form of 'bodily exit' or 'autoplay' where players ceased to feel they exercised any agency over the machine, but under which the machine effectively 'played' them.

This excessive degree of loss of agency was not something I was aware of for players of *World of Warcraft*, yet a similar mechanism – continuity of play - was held responsible for the potent compulsion that could be triggered by its design. In his famous description of a Balinese cockfight Geertz uses the term 'deep play' to describe the point at which play ceased to be directed toward rational outcomes, where the 'utilitarian' value of those things at stake are no longer of consequence

(1973). In the Balinese cockfight 'status' was at stake, not the money wagered on the outcomes, the risk then was significantly greater than financial loss. Like the gamblers in Schüll's study something of greater value was sought, deep play describes the experience of being carried away whether that was into 'the zone' or through the embodied metaphor of a man and his cock. While acknowledging the polysemic use of the term 'play' (Sutton-Smith 1997), if we take Geertz's claim that only in 'deep play' did genuine play emerge then we can make an argument that *World of Warcraft* was not really play at all, or was at least not supposed to be. Mastery of performance in *World of Warcraft* was concerned with holding the possibility for 'deep play' at arm's length, it always loomed as a possibility at the periphery of a player's engagement with its architecture, but everything was done to prevent this state coming to pass. Deep play was associated with loss of control, with the inherent susceptibility to failure human players were charged with possessing. The practices discussed in this chapter then were mechanisms for the mitigation or even negation of the possibility of play, at least for those activities that really mattered in the game.

In light of this, the division of player interfaces into the world and the information about that world represents a microcosm of the concepts of order that characterised engagement with *World of Warcraft*. Here Golub's critique of 'immersion' has wider application – it was not the case that players were more immersed in projects of collective action that sought to rationalise the game world, but that immersion in any kind of activity in the game was problematic. The division of screen intentionally provided two distinct, if connected, forms of experience for players and one of the functions of this was to, in effect, ensure that a player never became 'caught up' in one or the other, they were resources for the provision of distraction that could break the hold of the repetitious mechanisms of the game. During raid and dungeon encounters performative failure was frequently attributed to players who become too deeply caught up in the activity of a single frame of the game – players who 'stood in fire' for example, it was assumed were caught up in the mechanisms of information display, such as 'damage meters', those who failed to acknowledge a 'boss mod' warning to be too caught up in the world of the game. Early in 2015, in the raiding section of the guild forum, under the title 'Raid

Awareness', Helkpo's guild leader, Chris, posted a link to a blog article called 'Raid Awareness is a Learned and Practiced Skill' on a blog called *It's Dangerous to Go Alone*. In his usual affable and understated manner the text that accompanied the link read simply:

"Here be the thread dedicated to raid awareness and general preparation for raids, roles and not dying to obvious crap. I'd suggest everyone have a gander at it, there might be some useful info for some and not much for others - either way it's a fun read just off the RL'ers comments."

The intent of the author of the article, who went by the name 'Hamlet', was to provide players with a "survey of techniques" that would enable raiders to optimise their performance. A key technique was centred on the way a player's UI should be used as "a tool to aim your attention". He explains:

"A corollary to the UI discussion is that there's a lot going on on your screen at any time. You can't be looking at all of it at once; the best you can do is a sort of rotation that passes through all the important points of interest. Try to start being conscious of where your eyes are while you raid. You might go from your raid frames to your feet and back nonstop, not due to any alert or trigger, but simply as something you always do (it takes a fraction of a second)."

Later in the article he argues that "raiding is fundamentally a challenge of mental organization. Your attention is a resource that's every bit as real as your mana. Spending it on the wrong things causes you to make mistakes and potentially die". Attention, then, was a human quality that could be rationally organised and habituated, rather than left to chance. Implicit in the ideals of optimal performance was an assumption that attention was a cognitive weak spot that players had to be ever mindful of lest it prove an inroad into immersive play. Csikszentmihalyi's notion of 'flow' is commonly referred to as an idealised experience of play (1990) in which a perfect balance between difficulty and ease facilitates continuous engagement in which the distinctions between person and whatever material form they engaged were experientially eroded. *World of Warcraft* by contrast was concerned

with the retention and demarcation of these distinctions, players were expected to pay due diligence to the actions of their bodies, the keys on their keyboards, the focus of their attention as well as what occurred on the screen.

2.11. Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the game culture of *World of Warcraft* as deeply concerned with the unpredictable and fallible performances of players, a characterisation that was contrasted with the game's system which was conceived as transparent, legible and fundamentally knowable system.

This conception of the game as a legible system was a consequence of the volume and aesthetic employed in player produced resources and information about the game which was viewed as disclosing its architecture. By following the guidelines presented in these resources players believed that they could eliminate contingency in the game that was located in the questionable enactment of these guides.

I suggested that we should understand the engagement of players with the game as being divided between conceived as 'architectural rules' and 'social rules' – the former representing the code of the game legitimised the latter that were seen as fulfilling the logic of the former where sites of indeterminacy were recognised.

The player produced knowledge about the game was always at risk because its direct relationship with the game's architecture could only be empirically proven in performance, therefore failure in performance always threatened the homologous status of architecture and this information. Because of this 'social rules' were strongly asserted to ensure that performance hewed as closely to this information. I demonstrated an example of this in terms of a raid strategy where adherence to the strategy despite numerous failures was viewed as indicative of this direct relationship.

To demonstrate that the relationship between these resources and the architecture was not homologous I critiqued the work of Golub, whose work suggested that 'addons' decompose the world.

Instead I argued that player produced knowledge about World of Warcraft is effectively supplemental to the architecture it is players who legitimised it as the 'underlying code'.

I finished by suggesting that, contra Golub, the integrity of the game world was as important as the information that overlay it and that players were expected to balance their interaction with these different modes of the game in order to avoid immersion in any one activity and thus lose control.

CHAPTER 3: AN ARCHITECTURE OF ENGLISHNESS: BEING CLOSE AND DISTANT AT THE SAME TIME

3.1. The Beginning and the End

I begin this chapter with an account of the origin of the guild that most of the London gamers in this study were members of. Its purpose is to provide a perspective on the role and operation of guilds in *World of Warcraft*, but also to show how the catalyst that led to the end of one guild and the beginning of another was centred on the action of a member whose private concerns leaked inappropriately into the game. This may sound like a trivial issue but the game was conceived as the ideal site for the practice of a certain kind of public and collective sociality that entailed certain duties and expectations. In failing to account for his misdemeanour, the whole endeavour became questionable, a guild lurched to its death and a new guild arose that promised to abide by the rules of the game.

The origins of Helkpo, the *World of Warcraft* guild the London gamers were at various points members of, begin in late 2004 before the game was commercially available and was in 'public beta'. 'Beta' versions of videogames or other types of software were unfinished but playable versions of games which were principally used by developers to identify 'bugs', faults, in the software. Beta versions of MMOs were also often made available to a limited number of members of the public who might further aid the identification of bugs, but were also a means of building interest in a game before its commercial release. This clearly succeeded for a group of people on the online gaming forum known as 'RLLMUK' some of whom had been given access to the beta version of *World of Warcraft* and had enthused about it accordingly. As a consequence of this, even before the game had been released this network of gamers had already discussed the details of the game such as which of the two warring 'factions' they would play and what kind of server they would play on, there being two different styles of play available at the time – 'RP' (role-playing servers) that emphasised immersion in the lore of the game and 'PvP' (player versus player servers) that emphasised warring between the two factions – the Horde and the Alliance.

Three of my informants re-called this period of time and through conversations with some of the other members who used the forum, and my own novice experiences of the game at the time, I was able to piece together a tentative history that can be seen in figure 1. The final guild in this graphic, 'The Tempest', ultimately disbanded in 2008 and several members went on to become Helkpo. The three years represented illustrate the relative fragility of most *World of Warcraft* guilds. Based on statistical analysis Ducheneaut *et al* claimed that "the 'death rate' [of guilds] is high with almost a quarter of the guilds disappearing each month". Further, the authors explained that "within the surviving guilds the 'churn rate' is also high, with a large fraction of the members leaving to be replaced by new ones" (2006: 5). The reasons for the short life of guilds in *World of Warcraft* was not necessarily negative, the Rulers of MUK disbanded because 'RP-PvP' (role-playing player versus player) servers were introduced into the game and it was decided that there was enough interest in this server type amongst members to make the move worthwhile. At this time it wasn't possible to move an entire guild to a new server, so a new guild was established called 'MUK'. The 'paid-transfer' feature that would later allow players to move an existing character from one server to another for a fee did not exist at this time either, so everybody who moved also had to start new characters from level 1. This move also enabled some other forum members who had created characters with the opposing faction to re-join their friends.
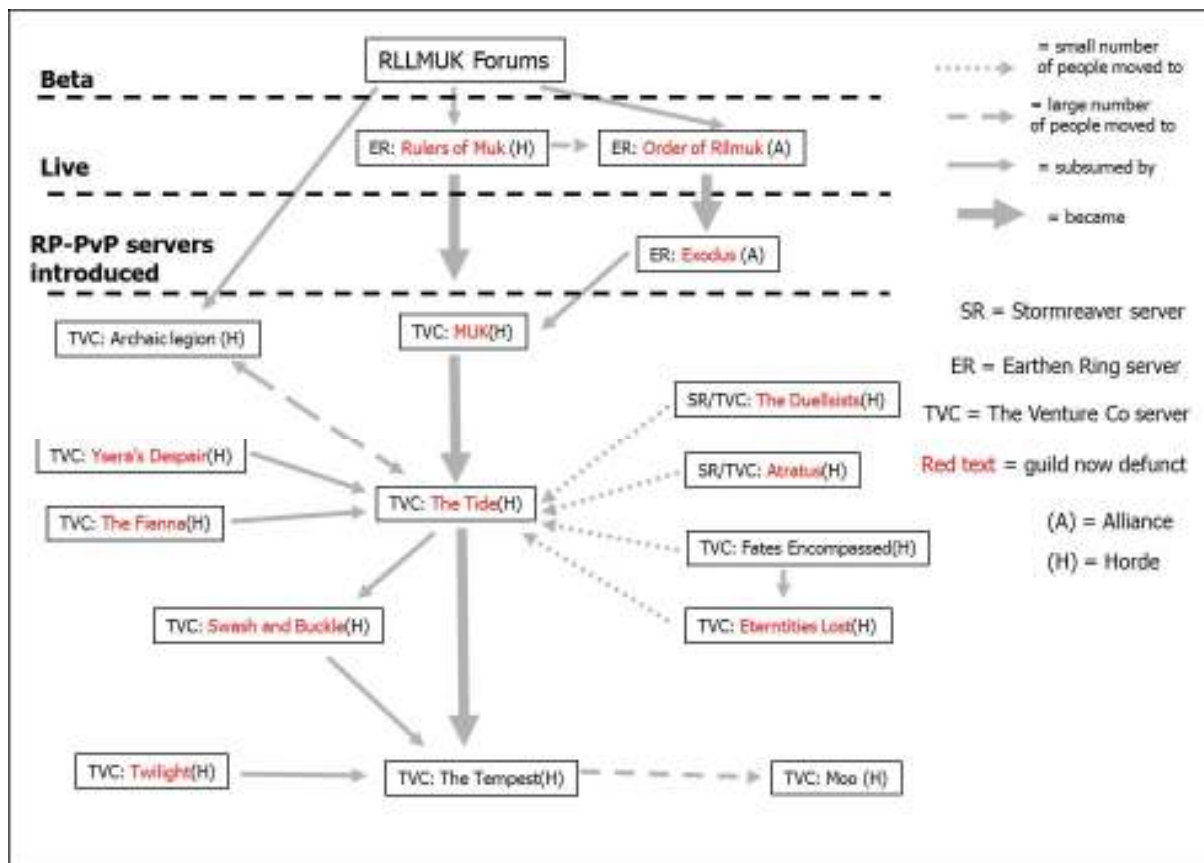
Figure 6: Diagram showing a rough history of guilds prior to Helkpo

MUK and the guilds that followed it, The Tide and The Tempest, did not last long however. Although the reasons for the collapse of the first two guilds were lost to the mists of time, I was a member of The Tempest for most of its existence, albeit in a very casual role where I was carrying out some commercial research, and through access to some of the discussions on The Tempest's online forum as well as my own observations of certain fateful events I was able to piece together the process of its disbandment.

It all began one day on July 2007. Logging on to *World of Warcraft* I found myself audience to an argument between one of the guild leaders, Kyle, and one of the guild 'officers'[7], Simon. It was summer, and as Kyle had noted when he handed in his resignation a few weeks later, summer was

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[7] As well as having 'leaders', guilds in World of Warcraft also had 'officers' who usually possessed some level of authority and with whom leaders were expected to consult when making significant decisions.

historically a period of time when fewer people played. The result of this was that the raid group for that evening was one member short, threatening to bring the evening's activities to a premature halt. Simon had not signed up to raid, but had logged on to the game because he wanted to carry out some solitary activities in the game. Kyle, who was also leading the raid, being one player down and seeing that one of the guild's most competent raiders had just logged on requested that he fill the empty raid position so that the evening would not be wasted for those players who were waiting to raid. Simon refused, explaining that he did not want to raid and, as he hadn't 'signed' for the raid in advance, as was the practice, he was under no obligation to do so. Kyle countered, stating that obligation or not, it was the right thing to do under the circumstances in order to maintain the guild's progress, that was on account of the season, waning.

Unswayed by Kyle's position, Simon held his ground and a full-blown argument broke out in green text in the 'chat channel' on my screen. At this time tensions were high in the guild and both individuals were known for their strong-minded and opinionated positions. At another time, if the guild had been making better progress, or if the argument had been between two other people a reconciliation might have been achieved. But on this day, at this time Simon, a player who had been part of the original MUK guild, was removed from The Tempest by Kyle, despite his protestations on the guild's forum and with this event the guild's days were effectively numbered.

Perhaps predictably, removing a key raider from the guild when it was already short of players failed to solve the problem of missing raiders and by the following February, due to an inability to find enough regular players to participate in raids, four more members had volunteered to lead the guild and subsequently departed. In a final bid to hold things together the last of these guild leaders, Harry, agreed to take the remaining members of The Tempest and join up with another guild called Drakkari Tribe so that there would be enough people to making raiding possible. Early 2008 was a difficult period for many guilds who aspired to raid in *World of Warcraft*. A new raid dungeon had been

introduced in September 2007 and new content including quests and a further new raid dungeon would be added to the game at the end of March 2008, but it was otherwise a fallow period for in-game activity and when this was the case players tended to become bored and their commitment to the game, and raiding, might ebb. For individual guild leaders, who were responsible for organising and executing raiding activities, this could be an extremely frustrating experience. Often the issue was finding enough people to raid to begin with, the second issue was that those who committed to do so actually did so on the evening of the raid. Drakkari Tribe was disbanded only a few weeks after the remaining members of The Tempest joined. A scheduled raiding event was one member short and the guild leader, in a fit of anger with guild members, removed everyone from the guild. It was following this that Helkpo was formed in March 2008.

3.2. New Beginnings

These were not uncommon occurrences for *World of Warcraft* guilds. The members of Helkpo, a guild that still exists as I type these words in 2016, experienced moments were it looked as though it would cease to exist. On these occasions the same mantra would be rehearsed 'Helkpo is not just about *World of Warcraft*, it will live on in other games, in guild meet-ups and in spirit'. The story of Helkpo's origins demonstrates something else, a contradiction that remained a thorn in the side of guilds who wished to raid in the game. In the context of the game's architecture, Simon's decision to log on when he stated his unavailability to raid must be understood in relation to the way his presence was registered through the game's architecture. To Kyle and the other twenty-three guild members preparing to raid, Simon's presence would have been made unambiguously known to them – yellow text would have appeared in the guild 'chat channel' stating that: 'Tane [the name of Simon's character] has just logged onto the server'. Within the 'guild panel' of the game's interface his name would have been visible as would his location in the game world. The architecture of the game made his presence explicit – a boon in the eyes of a desperate guild leader. Yet, Simon had also explained

that he wanted an evening off raiding, that he had committed a great deal of time to raiding over the previous months and felt he deserved time for the pursuit of interests exclusive to himself.

Yet the result of these conflicting accounts was invariably asymmetrical. The architecture was certain – Tane was incontrovertibly there - but Simon's motivation was much less transparent. Many guild members inferred that Simon's sudden decision not to raid reflected a certain mean-spiritedness. Various members of the guild explained to me that he had acquired most of the gear he needed for his character and was subsequently disinclined to help fellow, less well-equipped guild members. Simon's motivations were not known for a fact and in this absolute sense they were unknowable. Simon's account was partial and indeterminate – was he being honest, or was he concealing something from his guild mates. The 'account' the game produced was understood to be less equivocal – Tane was logged into the game and his gear was raid ready and that was the only account that mattered in *World of Warcraft*.

I recalled this scenario on several occasions with Harry, one of Helkpo's guild leaders and a friend of Simon's. On each occasion Harry stated "Simon's really cool, but Tane's a twat". He wasn't the only person to tell me this. Tom, Harry's best friend, and Ted, another friend, told me virtually the same thing. In most cases the relationship between a person and their role as a player was not so categorically expressed. This was because to a significant extent the 'person' was of less consequence than the player. To many of the people in The Tempest who did not know Simon in other domains Tane was simply a 'twat', it was only because Tom, Harry and Ted knew Simon that they were able to assert that he was 'cool'. But there is more to this distinction than just familiarity with an individual across two separate domains, Simon and Tane were connected the problem was that they were too connected for *World of Warcraft*.

Given the assertion that Simon and Tane were conceived in some respects as 'different', I was surprised to find in the time I spent with Simon that this division was much less apparent, at least to my eyes. Harry, Tom and Ted all supplied me with similar reasons for their opinions of Tane – he was 'selfish', 'argumentative' and overly concerned with the acquisition of gear. Players who exhibited these characteristics with any consistency were usually made pariahs in *World of Warcraft*. Social rules sanctioned against this kind of behaviour and elaborate systems such as Dragon Kill Points (DKP) discussed in the last chapter were semi-formally codified by guilds and this was seen to be undergirded by the architectural rules of a game that had been designed for collective play. But this remained a feature of the game's architecture that was open-ended enough that players could perform acts perceived as 'selfish' and this is precisely the point at which the social rules attempted to fill the gap. This gap was full of dramatic possibility, a site of temptation where the moral integrity of a player's performance was held in judgement. *World of Warcraft*, then had the potential to bring about morally questionable actions that could reflect on the player or more seriously, the person.

Simon was fortunate in this respect. Harry, Tom and Ted claimed that Simon wasn't fundamentally this kind of person, it was simply the case that Tane was his 'Mr Hyde'. In the name of ethics I abstained from telling Simon what his friends felt about his in-game persona, yet when we discussed his motivations for playing *World of Warcraft* I have little doubt that Simon would have been quite shocked by their views. Simon possessed a direct manner and a pragmatic turn that could occasionally be disarming, especially given the public discomfort people tended to exhibit in regards to matters deemed personal and private so characteristic of Englishness (Fox 2004, Miller 2016).

Unlike most people who participated in my fieldwork, he felt quite at ease asking others to share information on topics conventionally 'out of bounds', such as what their salary was and the number of sexual partners they had had. People were occasionally offended by this, but most of the time his manner was seen to reflect his 'honesty', that carried a certain subversive charm, and respected this

readiness to 'speak his mind'. One evening we sat together in the kitchen of his shared flat while he described to me how he had asked for a pay rise from his boss and was made an offer he was not entirely satisfied with. In response to this he had arranged for an interview at another company where he exaggerated the pay offer of his existing boss, this company subsequently offered him more. He then went back to his boss and told him that he would leave if he did not beat the amount he was being offered elsewhere. Which he did. Later that evening he explained to me that he enjoyed *World of Warcraft* because he strived to be the best at it and get the best gear because that's "what the game was about". These words could have come straight from the mouth of Tane. Simon, who had at one point in his life been a programmer, loved to understand systems and then play them for personal gain. His career was one of these systems and *World of Warcraft* was another one of these systems.

Simon's view of life and how to 'get ahead' in it was seen as appropriate in some domains where an individualistic perspective was deemed advantageous, but this was not the case for a *World of Warcraft* guild where an individual's fortunes were seen to be intrinsically tied up with others. Harry, Tom and Ted would not have suffered any direct consequences if Simon, through careful manoeuvring of offers of employment, landed himself a very high salary at small expense to a large company's profits, but the same manoeuvring was seen to pose a great risk to an entity like a guild. In this respect what an individual chose to do with their lives was seen to have minimal impact on these kinds of informal relationships. What one did, in English parlance, was one's own business – an individual's private concern. But in *World of Warcraft* one's 'private concerns' were vulnerable to exposure through the architectural impressions it made on the system.

This was not a question about who of Tane or Simon was more 'real' or not, it was about Simon's failure to adopt the correct disposition as a player and the consequences of that performative failure. If a raider chose to miss an evening of raiding it was normal for them either not to log on at all or to log on for only a few minutes, ask how the raid was going, and then promptly log out of the game

again. When a player explained that they did not intend to raid, few questions were asked regarding the reason why – this was a private matter – but it was assumed that the private matter would be conducted outside of the game. The absence of a player's presence was conceived as evidence enough that an individual had some other genuinely more important commitment to attend to and was not simply unwilling to raid. Within the public domain of *World of Warcraft,* a player's business was often the business of others. The game's architecture rendered Tane present and therefore the social rules advised that his presence as a well-geared and knowledgeable raider commit him to participating in an otherwise handicapped raiding team. His reluctance to do so exposed him to accusations of 'selfishness'. An action that might, in other domains, have passed without comment, here brought the full weight of punitive action against Simon – his removal from the guild. Of all the things Simon was willing to reveal about himself he seldom exposed his emotions, but on several occasions he admitted to me that he had been hurt by the treatment he received from guild members some of whom he considered friends.

The point of this extended ethnographic account is to draw attention to the way *World of Warcraft* had the capacity to re-organise relationships and reconfigure forms of subjectivity around the knowledge produced by the game. The previous chapter demonstrated how this occurred within the 'game culture' where the subjectivity of players was conceived as fallible and problematic, in this chapter the culture in question was that of Englishness. Here I draw on Daniel Miller's work on the dualism of English sociality which is deeply concerned with the establishment of boundaries between public and private domains (2015, 2016). As he describes it "English people are friendly and charitable in the public domain, yet remain highly protective of their private domains" (2016: 4). Miller explains that English culture seeks to create clear demarcations of public and private domains through sites that define the private, such as the 'home', and the public, such as a pub, that enacted distinct modes of sociality. Yet for the English there remained a pronounced anxiety that these boundaries could not always be sustained, that personal autonomy might be compromised by others or that one's attention

might impose on the autonomy of others. English sociality for Miller is defined by social distance. In his ethnography of social media, this technology was employed to perform a scalability of social relations in terms of degree of distance, to "carefully calibrate the precise distance they desire for a social relationship" (ibid: 5) and in this way he asserts that social media like Facebook and Twitter was in practice a mode of Englishness.

In this chapter I make a similar argument for *World of Warcraft* as an architecture of Englishness. Whilst social media enabled English people to calibrate the distance and proximity of relationships in Miller's study, here *World of Warcraft* made it possible for people to be both close and distant at the same time which it achieved by precluding and marginalising the private domain that was conceived as a contingent factor in the game. During this chapter then, it's my intention to examine how *World of Warcraft* made possible a more successful form of cultural order chiefly through the marginalisation of the private domains of sociality and subjectivity, the consequences of which will be followed through into chapter 4. *World of Warcraft* was a massively multiplayer game, a domain that offered a kind of unrivalled social expansiveness to those who participated in it, but the form of sociality it prioritised was that of social distance. Within the game players became 'knowable' in ways that were not possible in social networks external to the game, but this knowledge had the effect of increasing social distance. In the game it was possible to possess extensive 'knowledge' about a player very well without 'knowing' a great deal about the person.

3.3. Explaining 'Knowing' and 'Knowledge'

The terms 'knowing' and 'knowledge' I use at the end of the previous paragraph are evidently similar, but as analytical terms they are quite different from one another. Knowing was not just an analytic term, it was also an idiom used by London gamers to account for relationships that ranged from close friends to virtual strangers. I share with Schneider the view that an idiom is more than just an arbitrary term, that it "suggests ways of talking, thinking, or symbolizing other things", "a mode or

representation" (Schneider 1984: 52) therefore the fact that it was used to describe relationships of different strengths and weaknesses and distances and proximities marked it out as significant through this ambiguity.

In the first instance, it referred to partial and indeterminate information about people, it was subjectively constituted and intentionally ambiguous. It expressed what Malaby terms 'social contingency' – "the unpredictability of never being certain about another's point of view" (2007: 108) – but went further in its implication, denying the possibility of ever completely grasping other people in their fullness. Because of the ambiguous status of information, it represented about others, knowing was not a fundamentally fixed form of knowledge, it could express differing degrees of proximity and distance about the same individual at different times and to different audiences. It was also a form of knowledge that admitted not just the presence of information but its absence and its fictitiousness.

As contradictory as this may sound, knowing was an essential resource for the mediation of relationships because it contained the possibility for the expression of distance and proximity through which English people managed the public and private domains. It was in some ways comparable to the 'scalability' Miller identified for the use of social media referenced in the previous section, where different platforms were used to create more distant or proximal relations (2016). But while social media enabled for a more discrete categorisation in Miller's study, 'knowing' was less segmented and categorical and its expression could vary depending on audience and context. As a consequence, it was a less reliable means for the control and production of social distance. I will provide a richer account of 'knowing' shortly, but before doing so I want to turn to Simmel's work on 'Knowledge, truth and falsehoods in human relations' (1950) because it articulates many of the features of the relationships described through 'knowing' I recount in this chapter.

The essence of Simmel's argument is that relationships are equally constituted by concealment and lies as disclosure and truths. He admits, first that all relations are based on individuals "knowing

something about one another" (ibid: 307) but that the knowledge on which relationships are founded is never absolute, rather another is known from a "standpoint" that is a consequence of that particular relationship. This is a characteristic specific to human relationships because "no other object of knowledge can reveal or hide itself in the same way, because no other object modifies its behaviour in view of the fact that it is recognised" (ibid: 310). What individuals express or reveal about themselves to others then is what he describes as "a selection from the psychological-real whole" and that this selection of revelations are committed to with recourse to the person or persons to whom they are being presented (ibid: 312).

Simmel's picture of the incomplete and unknowable individual is presented as an entity of incoherence and irrationality from which a measured and reasoned selection of this internal maelstrom is presented to others. In this way, relationships are always constituted by both revelation and concealment. With this in mind he turns his attention to the matter of truths and lies, explaining that the complexities of modernity make it impossible for an individual to determine with any certainty the claims of others and that therefore "our modern life is based to a much larger extent than is usually realised upon the faith in the honesty of the other" (ibid: 313). In this way lies, he argues become much more painful, then, an experience that can be tempered by distance. Distance, however, factors as a fundamental process in any relationship because no matter the commonalities between two people there remains an asymmetry because there are things that one party knows that the other does not.

This duality is the foundation on which Simmel makes his fundamental point, that "concord, harmony, co-efficacy, which are unquestionably held to be socializing forces must nevertheless be interspersed with distance, competition, repulsion in order to yield the actual configuration of society" (ibid: 315). This absence of knowledge, he grants, is not just an unavoidable condition, but that intimate relations require some element of distance to retain their attractiveness, that "although reciprocal knowledge

conditions relationships positively, after all it does not do this by itself alone. Relationships being what they are, they also presuppose a certain ignorance and a measure of mutual concealment" (ibid).

Simmel's account is refreshing because it acknowledges that lies and concealment are just as social as honesty and the disclosure of information and this makes his work especially relevant for my account of English sociality. The duality of revelation and concealment of knowledge was a decisive factor for relationships, even close friendships because it established social distance and social distance enabled autonomy. Revelation and concealment were combined in the term 'knowing' rendering it an inherently incomplete form of knowledge.

As an example of this, Harry, Tom and Ted mentioned in the previous section claimed to be close friends and a brief account of their friendship as it was described to me and through what I observed follows. In public Harry displayed an effervescent charm, he seemed to be well-known and well-liked and had a knack for encouraging enthusiasm and excitement through his energetic personality. Tom, by contrast was quieter, somewhat taciturn and seemed to take himself more seriously unless he felt entirely relaxed with the company he was in. He was often misunderstood by those who knew him less well and was sometimes accused of being moody or even unpleasant. This duality could not have been more archetypal of a pair of best friends. Ted, like Harry tended to be more extroverted, but usually adopted a more playfully contrary attitude and enjoyed trying to get 'a rise' out of those he hung out with by playing devil's advocate. They told me independently of one another that their friendship originated with the alternative/metal club 'scene' in London in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They spoke of this period of their lives with great passion and sentiment. They presented this period as their formative years and their frequent presence on the scene meant that they established close friendships that endured even after their clubbing sojourns became more intermittent.

By the time of my fieldwork they rarely spent any time together and when they did so it was usually at an infrequent club night that happened around once a month or at other irregularly occurring

events such as the birthday celebrations of mutual friends. Ted and Harry often engaged in debates on Facebook, but these were typically group discussions and were not considered remotely intimate or private. At one point Ted organised a board games night at the house he shared with other friends, but Harry didn't ever manage to attend it as he was busy touring in a band he was the singer with and Tom only came to a handful sessions before claiming that he couldn't afford to make the journey into east London where Ted lived because he needed to save money for the guild meet-up that was due to take place the following month in Denmark. Ted was not entirely convinced by Tom's account explaining to me that he would have happily lent him the money, which was characteristic of Ted's generous nature, but he did not intend to take any action about it or question the reason he supplied despite the fact that he appeared unconvinced by its sincerity. Although it was evident that he was disappointed it did not appear to fundamentally alter their relationship.

The account so far illustrates that even the kind of information exchanged between close friends could be partial and indeterminate, demonstrating that 'knowing' pertained even for these kinds of strong relationships. It also suggests that, as Simmel argues, friendships may endure despite the concealment of information. This becomes even more apparent if we examine the situation further as on this occasion I decided to pursue the issue with Ted. If Ted was not entirely convinced by Tom's account what did he think the 'real' reason was? I asked Ted, as tactfully as I could, if he doubted Tom's account, but his response was to shrug, and offer nothing more than the excuse that he was "just a lazy bastard". The general consensus in the room amongst those present, other friends of Ted's, was that Tom had failed in some way in his obligations as a friend. "That's a shit excuse" Ian, one of Ted's housemates stated. Other supportive responses were aired. "He's going to miss out on a good one!" somebody else exclaimed. Here were friends doing what friends were supposed to do, which was be supportive whatever that might entail. Following this round of supportive comments and occasional disparaging allusions about Tom, discussion of this issue petered out as the game took up the attention of the room.

Yet, Tom's failure to attend the board game night threw up all sorts of questions for which there were no answers, but perhaps more significantly these were questions Ted had no intention of asking or perhaps even pondering other in the most private domain of his own mind. The absence of information may have been deemed unsatisfactory, but the thought that anyone might try to elicit further information was even less attractive. No one in the room offered to pressure Tom into provisioning Ted with a fuller account of his absence. Whatever close friendship meant to Ted it, as Simmel would have urged, did not preclude lies in some sense of the term and the social distance those lies constituted.

In the contexts of friendships and other informal relationships 'knowing' expressed the relative qualities of information. Tom had supplied Ted with information that accounted for his reason for not being there, yet Ted was sceptical that this was the genuine or the entire reason for his absence. But the simple fact that Tom had given a reason precluded further investigation by Ted. Tom's information was supplied to deter Ted from inquiring what the 'real' reason was. It produced social distance. It was what Bateson would describe as a piece of metacommunication (1972) that said 'don't try to get closer'. And as a close friend Ted was expected to acknowledge that 'request' because as far as Ted was concerned it was none of his business.

In contrast to 'knowing', 'knowledge' expressed the possibility for completeness and finitude of information. This was how players conceived *World of Warcraft*'s architecture as a homologous and legible system of information that could be understood and replicated in performance. However even if this was possible in terms of knowledge of others, it compromised the key values of privacy and to acquire information of this kind would mean an individual would have to be equally as frank about themselves, a difficult concept to countenance for the English. In English culture this kind of information about another would be seen as intrusive beyond all reason.

3.4 Englishness with no 'Alternative'

When I first met Anna she was in her early twenties, she was tall with dark hair and expressed an affable, good-humoured manner that could quickly switch to a deadpan response if she felt she was being patronised. She joined Helkpo in 2010 because her previous guild had disbanded and she 'knew' some of its members, including one of the guild leaders, Harry, Michelle, whom she described as a 'good friend' and her boyfriend Kev, all of whom she had met at the night clubs they sometimes frequented. She was somewhat younger than the others and perhaps for this reason viewed herself as slightly outside of the network to which they belonged which she described as "this really incestuous big group of people who all seem to do the same thing, all seem to play World of Warcraft and all seem to be geeks and all live in London and are a little bit strange".

Anna's characterisation was not entirely exaggerated. Although not everybody played *World of Warcraft*, their tastes tended toward what could be loosely described as 'alternative', not so much in terms of an opposition to consumerism or any other more politically oriented choices that Hebdige describes for 'subcultures' (1979), but in terms of the leisure based goods and services they committed themselves to and chose to spend their money on - in Bourdieu's terms their 'tastes' (1984). To build on Bourdieu's terminology, they lacked both cultural and economic capital in a mainstream sense, but their broad network afforded them a high degree of social capital that also acted as a means of support in a manner not entirely unrelated to that portrayed by Rainie and Wellman (2012) where relatively weak social ties, such as friends of friends could be deployed.

During my fieldwork this was particularly evident in the way that suitable flat mates for shared houses were identified and non-pecuniary resources such as space and labour could be shared. Although they lacked what Bourdieu would have described as cultural capital in terms of 'high culture' they participated in a genre of subcultural aesthetics broadly related to the heavy metal/alternative/rap music scene that arose in the 1990s in the UK and North America. This was not an especially extreme aesthetic, especially in a city with as diverse and varied a cultural make-up as London, but was

characterised by elements such as black band shirts, combat trousers, piercings and tattoos. This did not necessarily prevent individuals from working in conventional jobs. Harry worked as a trainer at a well-known London based government body for example and Anna worked as a recruitment consultant, Chris was a highly acclaimed manager at a call centre and Fiona was a qualified doctor. On the other hand, Ted experienced a range of employment in industries more directly related to his leisure interests and on several occasions found himself out of work and Michelle worked behind the bar at a series of pubs because she was studying to go to university.

Neither was this subcultural aesthetic was an expression of class politics, although many came from working class or lower middle class backgrounds, rather it expressed what was conceived as a broad rejection of what was perceived as mainstream consumption which was characterised in various ways as 'normal', 'prudish' or 'poncey'. At times ire was directed at what were viewed as 'middle class' values, but equally antipathy could be directed at what were understood as 'conservative' and 'narrow-minded' working class values. What their particular aesthetic seemed to articulate was a desire to step out of a simple class-based form of distinction by positioning itself as external to this discourse, while drawing on class characterisations to express its externality. It was principally expressed through acts of consumption that were seen to objectify values antithetical to the imagined values of middle England – for example when eating out the preferred choices were restaurants that sold 'American' style food, such as barbecued ribs and other kinds of meat that was eaten with hands as opposed to with cutlery, gigs and clubs were sought for their loudness and proclivity for aggressive (although rarely truly violent) types of interaction. Videogames, board games and pen and paper roleplaying games participated in this construction as somewhat marginalised uses of leisure time.

However, Anna's assertion that the group "all seemed to be geeks" is the kind of claim she could make only because she knew them well enough to have seen it with her own eyes. If the stereotype of the geek is cast as a lone, anti-social male, in terms of the public presentation of self, London gamers did not come across as anything like the traditional stereotype of the 'geek'. They were, on the whole a

very sociable group that was far from exclusively male. Significantly, in public a highly masculine, almost 'laddish' discourse and set of practices was predominant, especially when in larger groups. Although never overtly aggressive, it typically involved raised voices, consumption of alcohol, faux homo-erotic interaction and swearing. These practices reflected what Kate Fox refers to as 'pub talk' and 'banter' (2004) that will be discussed in more detail shortly.

Although they did not appeal to everybody, sports such as football and rugby commanded some collective attention. At club nights those present would usually hang out around the dance floor, often near the front by the DJ and 'mosh' or 'slam' – very physical and aggressive forms of dancing. Noticeably absent in these contexts however, was the use of racist or sexist language or behaviour that could be deemed demeaning to women. In conversation with individuals this kind of behaviour was frowned upon and was associated with conventional masculine values against which they differentiated themselves. At the same time the loud and laddish activities were drawn from more conventionally working class practices but were here used expressly to reject 'prudish' middle class values. Given this, it would be in accurate to refer to them as 'geeks' in any absolute sense, it would however be accurate to describe them as having 'geeky' tendencies, a fuller account of which will be provided in the next chapter, here it's important to note that the 'geeky' aspect of identity only really became apparent upon entering their homes, usually their bedrooms – their most private domains – where fantasy and science fiction books, graphic novels, DVDs and in some cases action figures or collectibles were on display.

Despite the way these London gamers identified themselves as 'alternative' and presented this through an opposition to values they attributed to conventionally English values, this fact did not in any way diminish their Englishness. Daniel Miller's ethnography of Englishness was conducted in an English village referred to as 'The Glades' north of London where we might expect people to be characteristically English (2016), yet despite the surface differences in appearance and taste between

the people who lived in The Glades and the gamers in my study they still held to the same values that admitted of a dualism defined by its public friendliness and a fiercely protective private sphere of autonomy.

In his paper 'The Tragic Denouement of English Sociality' that is concerned with how the twin modes of Englishness sociality detrimentally affected the elderly (2015), Miller also explains how as a consequence of the desire for autonomy elderly English people, some of whom were suffering from illnesses, often found themselves in situations of extreme social isolation. This was because they were concerned that their needs would impose on the lives of relatives or neighbours who were technically in a position to help and the latter felt awkward about providing help because they were concerned that they would be imposing on the elderly relative or neighbour. Public sociality was restricted to public spaces such as the street, pubs and shops characterised by greetings and 'chat', but the home was a discretely private space from which all but the most intimate were excluded.

Whilst many of these gamers lived in shared houses and shared flats and lacked the self-contained space of domestic privacy, the home, they reconstructed the same private and personal space through their bedrooms that housed virtually all their private belongings. Living conditions varied from house to house and flat to flat, but I observed that in most cases people kept their bed room doors shut or at the very least pulled-to. Bedrooms became symbolic private 'homes' and hallways, landings and kitchens symbolic public 'streets'. Before entering a housemate's or flatmate's bedroom it was etiquette to knock. If a housemate or flatmate was not in it was considered disrespectful to enter their room. Objects in shared spaces such as kitchenware and food were treated respectfully by others and if an individual really had to use, say someone else's cup, it would be washed and returned to the cupboard promptly.

This symbolic approximation of private and public space, however could be easily compromised simply because it was that much more difficult to conceal what took place in a bedroom than it was for an entire house or flat. One of the principal ways in which privacy was asserted however was through the concealment of information conceived as personal whether this concerned the individual themselves or was information about somebody else. For example, people generally showed great reluctance to talk about how they felt, or to share their opinions especially about other people, unless they were positive in a very unspecific way – 'he's great', 'she's cool' etc. - and subjects such as sexual partners or salary and political viewpoints were also usually avoided. Individuals who did disclose this kind of information were unusual and were referred to as such.

It might be expected that this would be the case for people who did not 'know' each other well, but it was also common between even the closest of friends. Harry and Tom, as I have noted, were considered 'best friends' and were even described to me by Harry's wife, Becky, in the rare idiom of kinship - 'brothers'. Unlike most of the friendships I observed Tom visited Harry's flat with some frequency, in part because he also counted Becky as a friend through his closeness with Harry. During a visit to Harry's during 2011 however, Tom had not visited Harry for some time and Becky expressed concern about their relationship, explaining to me that she didn't know what had happened between them. In the first instance then, Harry had clearly not told his wife Becky what had transpired between himself and Tom, demonstrating the way that even between husband and wife this kind of information was concealed with no apparent impact on their relationship.

When I asked Harry what had occurred between him and Tom, he declared with some irritation that "Tom is a fucking mentalist when it comes to WoW!" Tom displayed an unusually intense emotional relationship with the guild and frequently took offense at what he felt were infractions against it by other members. As Harry was both his best friend and one of the guild leaders, it appeared that Tom would invariably take up any issues with him. For Harry this had become increasingly bothersome as

he felt that many of the problems Tom shared with him were actually rather trivial and his ire misplaced. It was further complicated by the fact that Tom refused to talk to Harry apart from through email and had sent a relentless stream of messages to him even though Harry had asked him to stop sending them. Harry had even gone so far as to explain to Harry that it was actually "hurting their 'RL' relationship". Tom's response was to tell Harry not to bother giving him a present he had bought for him, stating: "I doubt I will see you soon". Their relationship remained at an impasse for several months following this altercation before normal relations were resumed.

The tension between Harry and Tom can be seen as arising from Harry's feeling that Tom was sharing too much information. Harry explained to me that initially he had been receptive to Tom's concerns about the guild and had listened to what he had to say on the matter, but that after he suggested that Tom was overreacting he began to deluge him with examples intended to demonstrate that this was not the case. As a consequence, Harry felt that his autonomy was diminished because the conventions of distance had been compromised and as a result the status of their friendship was lessened.

Even the closest of friendships, then, were subject to the delineations of public and private domains. Harry and Matt shared more than most, their friendship status was defined by the exchange of personal information – intimate thoughts and feelings - and Matt had the privilege as a close friend of being admitted to that most private of domains - the family home - but both parties maintained a commitment to their autonomy and that was breached in the incident described above. The only way Harry conceived of generating the social distance necessary to engender his sense of autonomy was to threaten to invoke an absolute social distance by putting their entire friendship at stake.

How do control and contingency figure in this play of thresholds set and crossed? All boundaries conceive of an order, a proper place for things, as Mary Douglas explained for notions of dirt and pollution in culture (1966). In this way the cultural boundaries that sought to demarcate the domains

of public and private attempted to generate stable relations of values. It was also evident that in practice these boundaries were always under threat. Relationships between people of any kind entailed contingency and a feature of that contingency was that the boundaries that were so crucial to English people's sense of autonomy would be contravened. A significant problem in this equation was that the kinds of information and acts that constituted private and public were only relatively ascribed. There was certainly subject matter that was considered conventionally 'out of bounds', for example topics such as how much an individual earned, or number of sexual partners as mentioned above were generally seen as out of bounds but for the most intimate of relations, and even then they could be controversial, however as the same examples illustrate this did not mean that everybody would treat them as such.

Given the risks that were inherent in relationships of any kind how did English people find ways to establish more secure boundaries for the concealment of private information? As Miller (2016) and Fox (2004) explain, distinctly public spaces were demarcated in English culture. As was the case across England, for London gamers pubs were a preferred choice as were clubs and gigs and house parties. The specific scope of privacy was shaped by the number of people involved in a pub visit and the degree to which those present knew each other. In dyadic form more personal information might be exchanged whereas as a general rule the larger the number of people who were present the less appropriate intimate information was considered to be.

This is somewhat at odds with what Kate Fox describes. She states that arguments and aggressive acts, usually by males, in pubs was an indirect means to express intimacy, that it allowed "them to achieve intimacy under the macho camouflage of competition" (2004: 104). The practices she describes were certainly common at sites during my fieldwork, especially in large groups, however my understanding of what was occurring was a relative form of intimacy that was characterised by its 'public' status. That is nothing really personal was exchanged in these settings. The term banter Fox and Miller discuss

was usually a genre of social performance in which people might do or say a lot without revealing anything of too personal or private a nature about themselves.

A common subject for banter was music, for example. As with Fox's account, this frequently assumed a competitive form in some way. A typical example involved Kev and Tom at a house party engaged in a debate about which of the heavy metal band Anthrax's singers was the best. At once an entirely subjective position that drew on a relatively standardised set of claims that constituted a discourse of its own. One side favoured the vocalist 'Joey Belladonna' on the grounds that he was the singer with the band during what was considered its 'classic' era throughout the 1980s, the other position favoured 'John Bush' on the basis of the claim that he was technically the 'better' singer even if during the time he was with the band their popularity and status had waned. The argument was carried out with expressions of outrage and incredulity that the other party might hold an opposing view but the intention was that ultimately it did not matter and the status of the relationship between Tom and Kev would not be altered by the engagement and the knowledge that Kev preferred Joey Belladona and Tom favoured John Bush did not reveal anything particularly personal about either of them. Even the exaggerated emotional responses were performed to demonstrate that they were not genuine emotional responses, which were viewed as revealing something personal about an individual.

In this way banter produced social distance at the same time as enabling a surface form of friendliness that Miller explains was typical of the way the English established boundaries between public and private domains. Equally, I want to argue that banter was also a way to conceal information from others and that the predictable form in which banter proceeded reduced the risk inherent in social engagement because it had an almost prescriptive ritual-like quality to it. Banter participated of 'knowing' because the knowledge it produced of others was partial and incomplete. On numerous occasions I found myself immersed in banter exchanges that might go on for in excess of an hour or on occasion the better part of an evening without anyone revealing a great deal about themselves.

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Yet those who participated would come away feeling that they 'knew' each better than before. Banter was a social glue that bound people together at the same time as producing the distance that was essential for public performances of sociality.

This kind of knowing was restricted to the public domain and admitted of others that they were competent performers in that domain precisely because they did not reveal anything private about themselves that might either break the 'ritual' or imply that there was some kind of obligation for the other participants to reveal something equally as personal about themselves, the latter being a state of affairs that was always viewed with great dismay and awkwardness.

As effective boundaries of public and private domains were at establishing distance there was a larger issue specific to the lives of London gamers that problematised their maintenance – this was the network sociality through which relationships were established and this is the subject of the next section.

3.5. The Complexities of Networks

This section examines the effects of the social network that London gamers were part of and the strains it placed on the boundaries of public and private domains. It is not an exaggeration to say that in the absence of the more conventional 'family' that formed the basic unit of society for much of the British Isles, even when families themselves were becoming more fragmented, the network was their effective social unit. These gamers lived through the network. This enabled a powerfully expansive form of sociality that provided relatively diverse connections but at the same time one of the consequences of the network was that information about individuals flowed through it with great freedom and sometimes appeared to take on a life of its own independent of those it originated from.

When Anna described the London gamers in this study as "this really incestuous big group of people who all seem to do the same thing, all seem to play World of Warcraft and all seem to be geeks and all live in London and are a little bit strange" she was accurate in some ways, but her description of them as a 'group' was far off the mark. A 'group' implies a collectivity with distinctly more hermetic qualities that expressed clear bounds of inclusion and exclusion, and while this was the case to a certain extent, in as much as those who joined it tended to express 'alternative' tastes in some way this still permitted an open and diverse range of individuals into the network. In practice there appeared to be no end to the addition of new people who could claim some connection to those already part of this web of relations and individuals tended to be highly open to the possibility for new relationships, whether these were made through work, clubbing or gaming. The breadth of these connections was apparent at relatively public events such as birthday celebrations that took place in pubs, or at house parties and club nights. At these events people would 'banter' or simply 'hang out' with people with whom they had very weak ties and the potential for the development of stronger social ties would arise.

Many of the claims Rainie and Wellman make in their recent study of the development of social networks through new technologies they describe as 'networked individualism' bear on what I observed of this network (2012). The substance of Rainie and Wellman's argument is that the increased networking breadth that new technologies has enabled has essentially dis-embedded individuals from group forms of identity, such as the family and the workplace, producing what they term 'networked individualism' a form of individualism that is sustained by its network connections that allows greater freedom at the expense of trust. Each individual then has their own network sociality in which connections may be de-personalised to some extent because they otherwise fulfil some specific role, rendering relationships partial rather than solidary. The networks they describe were directed toward a somewhat rationalised process of producing social capital that would increase the efficiency of the individual at the centre of these relations.

Certain of Rainie and Wellman's claims were in evidence during my fieldwork. For example, the authors attribute 'flexible autonomy' to members of networks who are free to tailor their individual interactions with others and that network members emphasize the 'roles' of their connections. London gamers were certainly not as tied down by obligations and responsibilities as those who had families and the network's diversity meant that some individuals were recognised as fulfilling a specific role. Yet the individuals Rainie and Wellman describe are depicted as much more calculating and instrumentally motivated compared to the people I got to know during my fieldwork.

In practice this seemingly ever-expanding network was a site through which social capital grew, but this social capital itself appeared to be more concerned with developing a sense of belonging than being a set of resources undergirded by the insurance of existing relationships. The network generated a site where people could attempt to balance the contingent ways in which relationships were established with a degree of assurance that these relationships were anchored in pre-existing connections of some kind that secured some prior relation of 'knowing', even if it was of a tenuous nature. So while Rainie and Wellman suggest that networks reduced trust because of their attenuated scope, here the network was productive of a form of trust even if trust itself should be understood as a response to forms of knowledge that were deemed partial and incomplete.

The reason for the differences between Rainie and Wellman's claims for 'networked individualism' and the London gamer's network is most likely because the latter appeared to be the outcome of the geography of London where in the absence of a community defined by proximity, certain locations like night clubs functioned as localised hubs where individuals established relationships that subsequently transcended the locality to become networks. It's also the case that this network pre-dated the mass adoption of communication technologies and certainly social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter and smartphones and while people adopted some of these social media platforms to enhance their network interactions they were very much bolted onto an existing network.

So although Rainie and Wellman argue that "social reality is relational" (2012: 39) and that society is effectively "structures of relationships" (ibid: 21) the network in which the London gamers were embedded had more holistic qualities that enabled people like Anna, who viewed themselves as new to the network, as a 'group' because a degree of homogeneity could be attributed to it. There was a further way in which Rainie and Wellman's network differed from the network in my study - the authors declared that for 'networked individualism' information was able to move more quickly and efficiently in networks, that it "wanted to be free" (2012: 132). In this network information did move rapidly but the individuals whom this information related to often had no desire for this information 'to be free' because free information could pose a threat to the boundaries between public and private and an individual's sense of autonomy.

3.6. Contingent Information

Information then affected a form of contingency within the network which might compromise social distance because information of a private kind could reach those for whom it was not intended. This was further problematised by the general state of social contingency that prevailed in relationships where the concealment of information was a fundamental feature. While concealment enabled social distance in dyadic relations, as discussed in the previous sections, it also produced conditions that afforded the free-flow of information. The first of these conditions was that because information was always partial individuals were always trying to deduce the intentions behind the actions of others which they were often unable to elicit outright by asking the individual in question because this information was effectively private. This meant that in the interpretation of the acts of others intention, or the meaning attributed to it was often 'fictionalised'- that is people 'made things up'. This was not necessarily done wilfully, although occasionally it could be, but simply as means by which the actions of others were accounted for. So a degree of 'semiotic contingency', the ambiguity of meaning, was also present in these engagements.

The third issue was that the legitimate concealment of information in relationships meant that individuals were often not held accountable for the things they said about others. To ask another to account for their actions was to risk violating the boundaries of personal autonomy. This did not entirely preclude instantiations where individuals were asked to account for their actions but the thought of doing so was often viewed with great unease and typically the costs of doing so were viewed as outweighing the benefits. Confrontation was something the English strove to avoid. In the absence of formal constraints then, individuals could produce and share information about others as an expression of autonomy.

An example of this concerned an individual, Sam, who, through *World of Warcraft*, temporarily became part of the network. Sam lived in a county just outside London so on the occasion of being invited to a weekend party that would take place over Saturday and Sunday he was offered a sofa to sleep on at Harry's house along with several other people who lived some distance outside London. The party began on Saturday afternoon with a barbecue before moving to a pub in the late afternoon. Another barbecue took place the following day at which point I was approached by a friend of Harry's whom I knew through various events who asked if Sam could sleep at my flat. I asked why he was no longing staying with Harry and was told that he had 'upset' a few people. Although I was present the whole time I had not been aware of Sam's misconduct and after we'd left the party I asked him what had happened. He seemed as confused about it as I did, explaining that "apparently I pissed some people off". When I inquired about what he had done to do so, he shrugged and said he wasn't sure, admittedly he was very drunk at this time, but when we discussed the subject the following day he seemed no more certain than he had been the evening before.

Sam was on the whole a very affable person and up to this point had been extremely popular in the *World of Warcraft* guild and seemed to get on with everybody he met in the network, however after this point he was effectively severed from it. In the week after the party I asked three different people what had transpired and received three very different answers. The first was that he had slammed a

taxi door onto somebody's hand, a story that was at a later point corroborated by the victim. Another individual told me that he had eaten a burger that belonged to somebody else, an 'expensive one' I was assured. And the final story stated that he had taken other people's drinks and that he was a "posh twat" the implication being that his social class had something to do with his poor behaviour.

It was difficult to know if any of these accounts were true, if some were true or if all of them were true. It's quite possible that Sam was concealing facts from me, it's also clear that some individuals harboured some resentment towards him that might have coloured their version of the story. At various points after this event Sam expressed his own sense of bewilderment on the guild forum explaining that he didn't know what he'd done to upset people, but apologised for any upset he'd caused. In most cases his posts were met with silence because everyone now felt very awkward.

This was one of those rare occasions when somebody was held accountable for their actions in a direct way, and this was principally because Sam continued to come to the guild forum even when his posts were ignored. Guild leader Chris sent him a 'private message' through the guild forum that explained each of the accusations levelled against him by various people. But Sam maintained that he was innocent stating either that he had not done what he was accused of or had meant no ill-intention by it. Specifically stating that the accident involving a taxi door was just that.

I stated earlier that the network produced trust, but, based on the discussion in the previous paragraphs, this might be difficult to believe. Trust, however, as Simmel states was a form of "faith in the honesty of others" (1950: 313) that people held to precisely because so much was unknown in relationships and it will become clear in later sections of this chapter how *World of Warcraft* was seen to rectify this situation through legitimate forms of accountability. This does not deny the 'power' of trust: trust was not simply a passive by-product of network relations – people had to demonstrate that they could be trusted, or at least that they were not untrustworthy - and trust was almost always stronger in closer relationships, but the power of trust inhered in its ability to function without formal contractual obligations on the part of those whose relationships constituted it.

The threats to public and private boundaries that the network manifest were principally a cause of the way individuals in it were supra-dyadically connected, that is: an individual's connections were also connected which meant that information about an individual could be produced by people other than that individual. While a picture of a network may be imagined as a central node from which a series of individual lines project outwards to connect with other nodes, in reality many of these nodes were also connected. As such a scenario like the one described above could arise where information about an individual was produced by others that might bear a questionable relationship to reality from the perspective of that individual. This kind of information was often described as 'rumour' a term that specified its indeterminate relation with 'the truth' from the perspective of those who were doubtful of the facticity of the information it contained.

Proof lay not in the information itself, its incompleteness was rarely in doubt, but by the strength of trust produced by the proximity of relationships. That is: people were more likely to believe something to be true the closer the relationship they had with the person who provided the information. This was why the claims made by Sam, who had a relatively marginal status in the network, were viewed as holding less weight than the charges made against him by people who were well-known within this part of the network. From an individual's perspective, however, the problem was that because of the interconnectedness of the network the relative strength of a relationship was rarely stable. As I have demonstrated already close friendships could become weaker and more distant and new friendships could emerge between individuals that in some way eclipsed older relations, even if only temporarily.

For example, Helkpo members at various points in time, Neil and Kev lived together in a shared house. They knew each other prior to living together because both were mutual friends of Harry's, but as they had lived together for some time their relationship evolved into a friendship autonomously of Harry – so they would spend time together without his participation, including going to the pub and undertaking other activities together. In this instance the outcome was positive for both Kev and Neil

who evidently both got on very well together and supported each other through attendance of birthday parties and on other occasions when mutual support was required.

One might also be tempted to suggest that Harry also benefitted from the coming together of his mutual friends. It was clear that the act of introducing a friend to a friend also recognised the status of the originator of these friendships. That is, introducing mutual friends involved a risk in terms of how they might respond to each other – would they get on and if not how would that affect their views of the person who introduced them? Within networks people were very much a product of the relationships they had, so to make the statement that an individual was a close friend to another was to submit that fact to empirical test. So in this instance Harry appeared to have successfully passed the test. Kev and Neil's friendship suggested that Harry made consistently good choices in his friendships and that behove his status and reputation.

But within networks things were never as simple as this would suggest. Perhaps out of the sheer fact of forced proximity, that Neil and Kev lived together and therefore spent more time in each other's company than either of them did with Harry, they became closer friends than they were with Harry – where Harry was absent at telling events such as birthday parties they were present, for example. On several occasions they discussed Harry in less than glowing terms – nothing explicitly hostile or insulting, but full of implications that he was not the person he claimed to be, that he was no longer as significant a person to them as he had once been. It was not the case that they ceased to be friends with Harry or actively disliked him, but from this perspective Harry's status had diminished in the eyes of his two mutual friends, an outcome Harry probably did not foresee and as far as I was aware was completely oblivious to. Although I was not able to follow the range of Neil and Kev's comments in their entirety, I did overhear Kev share them with his girlfriend meaning that it's quite possible they spread even further afield.

The information that Neil and Kev produced about Harry was typical of the partial knowledge born of a "particular standpoint" (Simmel 1950) that constituted 'knowing'. In their agreements about Harry

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they increased the distance between themselves and him while drawing each other closer. Knowing enabled this 'slider effect' to express the strengths and weaknesses of relationships. The purpose of the shared comments may have been as much a mutual demonstration of their own relationship which was possible not by revealing information about themselves but by distancing the relationship they mutually shared, but it was the contingent and partial nature of information in the network that made this possible. For Kev's girlfriend, however, this information developed into something more like a fact it became something she 'knew' about Harry – "he's a bit two-faced" she explained to me - even though this information had not been directly deduced from her encounters with Harry himself who was unaware of this particular perspective on his character.

In the next section I consider how information and the people it referred to could become lost in the network.

3.7. Lost in the Network

At the end of the last chapter I discussed how immersion could be conceived as a form of loss of agency and how *World of Warcraft* configured engagement to mitigate against this kind of compromise of control. In this section I want to describe through two detailed ethnographic examples how networks could comprise comparable sites in which loss of agency could occur principally through the way information operated in the network.

My point in doing so is not to suggest that this was an inherently negative experience for people, even if it could be perceived as such, rather it is to prepare the reader for the following section which contrasts this mode of relationality with that which was asserted through *World of Warcraft* where the desire was that information about people should be fixed and absolute.

My first ethnographic detail describes a 'cluster' (Granovetter 1974) within the network, a set of closer relationships that was to some extent bound by the exclusivity of its activities. In a large network Grannovetter states that clusters typically formed out of associations of stronger ties. Clusters can be

understood in one sense as a means by which information was constrained within networks, however even within smaller sub-networks the free flow of information could be problematic.

Most clusters tended to be based on long-term friendships that pre-dated my fieldwork, but I had the good fortune to see one of these clusters emerge from a set of weak ties into a considerably stronger and more exclusive set of ties bonded by degrees of friendship and intimacy. The core members of this cluster consisted of Chris, who became guild leader of Helkpo in 2012, Anna and Tom. Chris and Anna had already established a relationship of sorts because they had been in a guild together before joining Helkpo, however, when they first joined they were not noticeably close. Anna 'knew' Tom from clubbing where she had been introduced to him by Harry, but their initial encounters were principally memorable for Anna because she had found Tom to be rude and had told Harry that "your friend is a cunt" – a story she enjoyed recounting to me and Tom, who subsequently acknowledged that Anna was "probably right".

However, the three of them became close during a lull in raiding prior to the release of the Mists of Pandaria expansion in late 2012 when they spent a great deal of time playing PvP together and these close relationships held the guild together in the absence of the weaker ties required for raiding. During this period Anna and Chris developed their relationship through an alternative form of media - the mobile phone - which enabled a more intimate dyadic relationship to emerge out of the more group oriented discussions they had during *World of Warcraft*. A great deal of this conversation was Chris sharing the burdens of being a guild leader and Anna lending him encouragement and support which sedimented their friendship.

Besides Chris, Anna and Tom, several other people became part of this cluster: Michael, who was a member of the same guild Anna and Chris had been in prior to Helkpo; Nicola, who was a long-time member of Helkpo who had developed a strong friendship with Tom; her close friend, and also long term, if intermittent member of Helkpo, Fiona; Anna's boyfriend, Roy, who subsequently joined Helkpo; and to a lesser extent, Spryte, who was romantically involved with Chris but lived in Denmark

making regular participation impractical. Although the majority of the connections that pertained between these individuals commenced in *World of Warcraft* they transitioned smoothly into this 'real life' domain. At this point in time Chris, Anna and Tom all lived at their parental homes for various reasons and because they all lived a substantial distance from each other they settled on a location in central London, a cocktail bar well-known for its protracted 'happy hour' that offered reduced costs for drinks, to define a comfortable and accessible public domain where they could hang out.

Although this sociality was enacted in a public space, it was framed as somewhat private through its exclusivity. Although I had spent plenty of time with most of its members both individually and in larger more publicly defined contexts, somewhat awkwardly I had to ask Chris if I could be invited to their gatherings and he had first to check that everyone was comfortable with my presence. These meet-ups were irregular and somewhat infrequent, taking place on average less than once a month, but this sporadic pattern was not, as far as I was aware, seen as an obstacle to the friendships it fomented. These moderately formal arrangements in moderately public places accorded well with the level of privacy that combined proximal dyadic relations with more distant tertiary ones.

Within this relatively small cluster of eight people it might be assumed that information would have been relatively well contained yet the occasion I recount shows just how complex information could be and the kind of partial knowledges it produced. The effect was that one member of this 'cluster' of friends was left in a state somewhere between hope and futility.

Tom, who I'm afraid comes out of this study as a rather abject figure, had been briefly involved romantically with Fiona, which from what I understood was just a short 'fling' following which, according to those I spoke with, she "acted weirdly with him". I had been informed about these brief romance at a party some months prior, but having not heard anything further from anybody including Tom I assumed that it was no longer an issue. Chris, Anna, Nicola and Spryte, however, 'knew' that Tom still desired a romantic relationship with Fiona, even though he denied that this was the case and Chris enjoyed pointing this out to him in a playful manner throughout the evenings I was present.

Anna and Chris took a lot of pleasure in explaining, or better still speculating on the possible outcomes of this situation that appeared to me to be a casebook example of unrequited love.

However, according to Nicola, Fiona's close friend, Fiona had not outright stated that a romance was out of the question with Tom, but unfortunately Fiona had taken an interest in Michael and apparently Michael had reciprocated her affections. This information was passed onto me in hushed tones so as to avoid being overheard by Tom, although in the same conversations Anna added that Tom must have been aware of this. Thus much of the evening was a performance of indifference where information that apparently everybody 'knew' to be the case was ignored.

Tom bantered with Michael and greeted Fiona warmly when she arrived. When Tom joined Fiona at the bar Anna and Chris huddled together and scrutinised their interaction as though something might happen. When we left the bar much later, it was noticed that Michael and Fiona were not present, so I accompanied Anna back into the bar in order to locate them. It didn't take us long to find them as they were stood in the middle of the dance floor lips locked firmly together in romantic embrace. Anna spun on her heel and virtually dragged me from the room, in an attempt to deny what was quite visible to our eyes reflecting the strange requirements a commitment to friendship entailed to all involved.

The involvement of romance, potential and real, only complicated things for English people and no doubt made this scenario even more confusing for everybody involved. But it was also demonstrated how information could operate independently of individuals and seemingly contradict the reality of their actions. Nicola's urging that Fiona had not ruled out some kind of romantic relationship with Tom appeared to be contradicted by the events that took place between her and Michael. At the same time on other occasions the relationship between Michael and Fiona appeared to be platonic, so perhaps the information was true. Tom denied that he was interested in Fiona, even though everybody else claimed that he was and his ambivalence toward the physical evidence of Michael and Fiona suggested that he wasn't. Anna had repeatedly told me that Fiona and Michael were involved

in a relationship yet when it was presented to us in as unambiguous a manner as a public space allowed her first reaction was to attempt to deny it.

While Anna and Chris could have fun at the expense of the relationships between Tom and Fiona and Fiona and Michael there was always the very real risk that it could damage the bonds that held them together – a little knowledge was fun, but too much knowledge was dangerous. When I had the opportunity to chat with Tom alone on a couple of occasions I asked him about his feelings toward Fiona – he would usually adopt look wistful and claim in a resigned fashion that he used to 'like her' but that wasn't the case anymore. My sense was that Tom didn't really know himself in both senses of the term. His feelings toward her seemed to be as much the fantasy of his friends as his own personal feelings and his lack of action and inability to state that he had no feelings for her categorically only seemed to fuel the fire of speculation.

Here personal information about Tom ran freely between members of the cluster and beyond as it leaked through to the wider set of nodes around the cluster to the point that in the absence of Tom it was on one occasions used as the subject of meaningless banter. The network effect meant this information travelled even though Tom would rather it had not and speculation and rumours modified it so that, whatever the truth was, it no longer resembled anything Tom had himself said or done.

In the final example I illustrate how the network placed pressure on an individual to release information she felt very uncomfortable about. This was drawn from the ethnography I carried out with the pen and paper role players discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter. As noted in the introduction, having this second set of informants provided me with a valuable second 'field site' as I was able to make more confident generalisable claims about practices that related to Englishness, friendship and how they participated in the broader networks of which they were a part. The cluster within this network that constituted my main informants consisted primarily of women and the friendship between Alva and Sarah and a network that drew principally from the world of graduate art students and a different heavy metal club and gig scene. To an outsider both networks may have

appeared very similar, particularly given their sub-cultural tastes, but this network was noticeably less inclusive and was more obscurantist in its preferences.

While the network within which my *World of Warcraft* informants participated was characterised by a broad interest in principally North American produced fantasy such as comics, graphic novels and videogames, this network was more taken with the 'occult' side of fantasy and the underground global metal scene. They also tended to be from more middle-class backgrounds and expressed this through taste and education expressing an appreciation of art galleries and a token concern with the appropriation of otherwise subcultural commodities and media into 'mainstream' forms of culture. The particular example I will refer to concerned an ex-boyfriend of Alva's – Ian - and Rose, a friend of Sarah's with whom Alva had developed a relationship.

Alva was rather like Harry in that she seemed to get on well with everybody and have a large number of connections in the network. Virtually everywhere I went with her people who I had never met before would greet her excitedly and she would recount some story about getting drunk with them at a gig or festival. Alva was in most cases a very warm, friendly person whose popularity was a no doubt a consequence of the fact that she always expressed interest in what others told her.

This particular account concerns Ian with whom Alva who had been romantically involved several years prior to the event I describe and although they maintained a relationship it was restricted to domains conceived as more public and their interactions tended to be brief and somewhat formal. The reason for this was that during their romantic involvement Ian had struggled with alcohol. Whether this was something that existed prior to their relationship Alva was unsure, but it was a concern for her and his friend and flat mate they lived with, Ed. This concern became more serious when, due to his excessive alcohol consumption, Ian stopped paying his portion of the rent and started displaying generally erratic behaviour.

This continued for several months, and each month Ian promised that he would stop drinking and pay his rent. Unfortunately, he was unable to do this and Alva ended their relationship and she and Ed were forced to ask him to leave the flat. This was one of the rare occasions that somebody told me that they had explicitly ended a friendship. At a later point Alva and Ian re-established their friendship and Alva agreed to share a flat with him again, believing his promises that the same problems would not arise. Unfortunately, they did and for the second time she officially ended their friendship.

For Alva, the one up side of this unfortunate experience was that she and Ed developed a strong friendship, but Ed was considerably more reluctant to admit Ian as a friend again and a stand-offish relation pertained between them. I had met Ian on only a handful of occasions as he would occasionally be invited to gigs or other events, but he came across as a very sociable and well-liked individual, but Alva cautioned that this was just a public front he used to hide his continuing alcohol problems. Although this experience had clearly left a mark on Alva, and when she discussed it her usual carefree disposition took a more serious tone, it was clear that she felt he was now only a peripheral relationship in her life.

The problem was that Ian had established a friendship with Sarah, one of Alva's close friends, independently of Alva and occasionally Sarah would invite him to gigs or other nights out. One of the unexpected outcomes of this was that Ian and Rose, a friend of Sarah's, began dating. This was somewhat awkward because Ed lived in a flat share with Rose. Rose had apparently asked Alva if she "was okay" with the situation and Alva had told her that she was, but this was not remotely the truth – Alva was very concerned indeed – but as she put it, she didn't "feel close enough" to tell her that it was a problem.

There were several reasons for her anxiety, the main one was that Rose had no idea about Ian's problems with alcohol and she also felt quite disappointed that Sarah had made no effort to dissuade Rose from getting involved with Ian and this in turn had introduced an element of tension into the relationship between Alva and Sarah, who were otherwise very close friends. She also now felt

uncomfortable visiting Ed at the flat he shared with Rose. Alva was not sure what to do, and was worried that if she interfered it would be misconstrued as jealousy or possessiveness. Her response to this difficult situation was to explain to herself and anybody who would listen that Rose was not an "actual friend" which she qualified by stating that: "I wouldn't hang out with her by myself", she was just a "friend through Sarah" and this somehow absolved her of disclosing this very personal information about Ian.

In this instance Alva believed that telling Rose that Ian had (or had had) alcohol problems was the responsible thing to do, it was information that wanted to be 'free', but other concerns urged against her doing so. Her primary concern was that Rose would interpret her motive as a lingering interest in Ian that sought to undermine the relationship they had. This position was very stressful for Alva who normally expressed no compunction about doing what she thought was the 'right thing'. This caused her to express an uncommon frankness about her relationship with Rose, a tertiary relationship established through Sarah, in order to produce the appropriate degree of social distance between them that would absolve her of the responsibility of passing on the information.

This was an exemplary account of how the relative status of 'knowing' could function to produce more or less social distance as it was required. Given that relationships within a network constituted individuals, however, it also draws attention, again, to the way information caused Alva to question herself and who she was in relation to Rose – was she a 'friend' or not and what where the consequences that either outcome entailed.

For both Tom and Alva information released into or concealed from the network rendered them uncertain about themselves and how they should act or conceive themselves in relation to others. The network then could cause an undue loss of an individual's self, their autonomy, a state in which control of any kind was severely compromised.

The network and the relationships that structured it constantly threatened the boundaries of public and private that were the essence of English sociality, including the ability to control information that was considered personal. Although concealment and banter generated a form of control of the private domain from leaking into those that counted as public, the network nature of relations often found ways for information to find other routes into more public domains.

Before examining the ways in which *World of Warcraft* was conceived as a way to restore the boundary between private and public in a more certain and controllable manner, I want to briefly review what these arguments presented so far meant in terms of friendship as this will become important to the claims I make about *World of Warcraft*.

3.8. Performativity and Prescription in Friendship

In this section I develop some theoretical perspectives on friendship and consider some of the scholarly work on the subject. The framework I draw on is Sahlins' distinction between the performative mode of culture and the prescriptive mode of culture (1985). In my conclusion I consider the theoretical implications of these terms for control in processual anthropologies, but here it's enough to say that the performative mode expressed a processual understanding of cultural categories as produced in action rather than being determined by prior expectations, while the prescriptive mode described how cultural categories were conceived as forms prior to action and therefore imbued performance with expectation.

My basic argument is that friendship was principally performative in the way it was established but then became more prescriptive by virtue of the expectations of social distance that characterised English sociality, particularly in domains that were considered public. Importantly the point I wish to make is that friendship could not be entirely comprehended without acknowledging the cultural element and that the particular form English friendship took may well differ from the generic concept of 'Western' friendship to which many sociological and anthropological studies refer, examples of which will be discussed during the debate. A further reason for the inclusion of this discussion is that

the ability for friendship to move between registers of private and public was essential for the cohesion of the World of Warcraft guild, an account of which will be provided in the next section.

In order to comprehend the way friendship worked within the network of London gamers it makes sense to start at the beginning, that is with how friendships came to be. Friendship in almost all cases originated from a more generic relationship status of 'knowing', that is people did not just meet and become friends, the process of becoming friends was performative and contingent. Typically for the networks of gamers I studied people established friendships with friends of friends so the prior relationship was one in which the relationship was mediated by someone else.

Few people appeared to actively set out to become 'friends' with another person, rather a relationship would be established between two people because of some commonality, whether that was a shared preference for music or some other activity, because they shared the same living space or work space, or through a shared experience, or several of this reasons combined. It was also the case that in a relationship of this kind those who subsequently became friends 'got on' with each other, that they enjoyed each other's company in some way. However, friendship was not a guaranteed result of this kind of 'friendly' relationship, rather friendship originated out of some act that was interpreted as an expression of worth between two people that then established a more enduring tie – a friendship – that entailed expectations that the original act was not a one off but a characteristic of the new relationship. Typically, this act was a kind of sacrifice in which an individual was seen to voluntarily give something up or risk something for the other person.

Stated in these terms friendship sounds highly formalised and this description really does not capture the unexpectedness with which a 'friendly' relationship could become a friendship. While the description above is based on a number of London gamer's accounts of how they established friendships, I was hesitant to rely entirely on stories that were recounted to me, often some time after the event. The fact that the stories people told me demonstrated a degree of uniformity, as my description above illustrates, only made me more suspicious. Ideally I would have preferred to observe

instances of friendship creation myself, however, although friendships were established between individuals during my fieldwork, it proved very difficult to be there at the moment when a relationship became a friendship principally because these instances were so unpredictable. What gave me confidence that these reports were accurate enough, even if they were invariably simplified and tidied up to better fit a normative cultural account, were my own experiences of establishing friendships with London gamers during my fieldwork.

Anthropology is one of the few disciplines in which it is legitimate to establish friendships of some kind with one's 'subjects' of study, especially if that gives one access to domains that would otherwise be inaccessible. Of course there will always be concerns that relationships of this kind might somehow compromise the ethics of a study in terms of the nascent objectivity the method strives to achieve, that the balance of participation and observation, proximity and distance, would tip toward the former in these pairs and therefore impinge upon the ethnographer's analytic capabilities. While it was always my concern to get the balance correct, I was indubitably aided in this process by the necessity for social distance in English relationships, including friendships, anyway, such that I could excuse myself when necessary without appearing to break any crucial social norms that would therefore jeopardise opportunities to collect the data I needed to be able to carry out my study.

The other issue I had to be conscious of is what it meant for the establishment of friendships where a significant reason for doing so was to produce data for my study. In all cases the individuals in question were aware of my status as an anthropologist and my purpose for participating in the various activities that constituted their lives. Crucially I was fortunate that English friendship is highly flexible in this regards and my more instrumental interests were not seen to compromise the authenticity of the friendships that we established. I put no pressure on any of the London gamers I met to become friends, indeed to do so would have invariably worked against the realisation of this relationship form and as my account below demonstrate, these friendships occurred spontaneously and were in no way an intentional part of my plan.

While I did not establish friendships with every person I got to know during fieldwork, in this section I will refer to three friendships that did arise between myself and London gamers that will provide ethnographic texture to my arguments. To begin with, then, these friendships followed the general process I describe above, in as much as I did not set out to become friends with these people and I can only assume that they did not have any intentions to do so with me, we did however appear to get on, I 'liked' them and presumably they liked me too. In the following paragraphs I will describe how more generic relationships of 'knowing' became friendships.

My friendship with Kev was established after he broke up with his girlfriend – a relationship of over two years - which ended awkwardly because they had many mutual friends. After their initial split, their relationship continued and the two slept together after they had formally 'broken up'. There was even a possibility that their relationship might start again, but this did not bear out. Rumours were spread that Kev had made advances towards a friend of his (ex-)girlfriend and because of this their relationship ended decisively and on bad terms. Furthermore, this caused several mutual friends to side against Kev leaving him feeling betrayed and somewhat isolated from his friends.

Given this state of affairs my presence in his life became more significant and my visits to his home were something he looked forward to with some enthusiasm. It also became clear that he was grateful that I had not taken sides. After this point he began to share more personal information with me when we met up, explaining to me how hurt he felt about his ex-girlfriend and how betrayed he felt by the rumours that were spread about him, as well as deeply personal revelations about mental illness and his other health concerns. One evening he explained to me that he hoped that the time I spent with him wasn't having an adverse effect on my relationships with the people who had taken his ex-girlfriend's side who he knew were also participants in my fieldwork, and he explained that he really enjoyed hanging out with me. From this point onwards, when he introduced me to people he knew he described me as "his good friend".

It was clear that he viewed my decision to continue 'hanging out' with him as a risk to the other relationships I had in the network and this act constituted the transformation of our relationship into a friendship. If the shift in our relationship status appears only very subtle to the reader, that's because I experienced it in the same way. While I certainly detected more excitement about my visits from Kev, an enhanced *bonhomie* for want of a better term, it did not occur to me, until he explicitly stated it to other people, that we were 'friends'. This of course suggests that friendships could be more one-sided in practice or at least non-synchronous in their realisation. The fact that friendship was rarely formalised as 'friendship' meant that there was often a degree of ambiguity about the meaning of an act.

For example, Anna described to me the surprise she experienced when Nicola unexpectedly attended her birthday celebration in a pub. "I really wasn't expecting it" she told me "I didn't think she'd come all that way". Anna and Nicola's relationship had up to that point always been mediated by other events, such as guild meet-ups and parties such that Nicola's presence at these events was never perceived as directly related to Anna's mutual presence. In this instance Nicola's gesture was perceived by Anna as a 'sacrifice', as Nicola making the effort and time to go out of her way for Anna. I asked Anna if this meant that they were friends, "I guess so" she replied.

The second example concerns Olly, who was an individual who I had only really met on a handful of occasions through a friend of his who was one of my regular informants. We discovered that we shared a number of thigs in common. He was completing a PhD at UCL and we also shared similar preferences for an obscure music genre. This meant that when we did encounter each other we often engaged in conversations about these shared elements of our lives. However, the relationship remained at this fairly insubstantial level until one day I received an email from him that explained that his brother had just passed away and he asked whether I could do him a 'huge' favour.

By chance I was connected through family relations to a well-known artist in his field who produced fantasy illustrations and Olly asked if it would be possible for this artist to create a work that his family

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could use to commemorate his brother. The artist in question agreed and produced an original work for Olly and his family. After this, even though we only met a handful of times, Olly repeatedly expressed his gratitude to me and began regular email correspondence where we talked not just about our commonalities but also more personal things, such as his relationship with his girlfriend, the frustrations he felt about the academic discipline he was associated with, his ambitions and frustrations as a writer and rather than meeting at shared public spaces such as parties or pubs he drove to my home to hang out with me on a couple of occasions. As with Kev, my role in acquiring the piece of artwork for his family was viewed as an exceptional act that demonstrated the degree to which I valued our relationship and this act transformed it into a friendship.

The final example describes the friendship I established with Alva. Like Kev, I saw Alva regularly during my fieldwork and we talked about impersonal subject matter such as our shared music tastes and board games we had played, but this changed one night at a gig. I had noticed during the evening that she was checking her phone more regularly than was normally the case and that she seemed a little more anxious than was usually the case. After the gig finished the venue became a club and I noticed that Alva was standing by the bar talking to a friend with tears in her eyes and it was clear to me that all was not well. Somewhat awkwardly I asked her if she was okay. Her initial response was to tell me that "it was nothing", but I persisted in my enquiry as it was quite apparent that something *was* wrong. Looking relieved, she explained to me that her boyfriend was travelling away for work and had sent her a text message explaining that he wished to end their relationship.

Doing what I felt was the right thing to do I expressed my outrage towards what I described as a craven way to end a relationship and that it would have been much better had he had the courage to do it face to face. Seeing that I was concerned Alva became very emotional and explained her situation to me in more depth and for the remainder of the evening whenever she checked her phone I asked if she was ok and suggested that she tell me as soon as he replied so I could help her 'interpret' the

message he sent. At the end of the evening I found myself reassuring her again when I found her in tears outside the club and told her to message me the next day when she had any more news.

Following this, Alva greeted me with a warmth that had not previously been evident and always appeared really happy to see me. She also revealed much more about her personal life to me and would occasionally email me with stories she had found on the internet that she thought I would be interested in. Again, my willingness to take time to listen to her concerns and support her in a time of need transformed our relationship into friendship.

Although the establishing acts that instantiated friendships bore these common traits, subsequent acts within the relationship varied enormously because they depended on so many specific and contingent factors. For example, I spent more time face to face with Kev and Alva because they were original participants in my fieldwork and, conveniently, lived quite close to me than I did with Olly, whom I saw less frequently because he lived some distance outside London, but would exchange an email about once a fortnight.

In more established friendships, as I have demonstrated, interaction might occur infrequently yet a relationship would be effectively sustained by historic acts. Ted and Harry rarely saw each other face to face, but would occasionally converse through public Facebook posts, acts that maintained the strength of the friendship status between them. Friendship was in this sense performative, there were few expectations regarding the particular form acts should take but there were some minor prescriptive expectations. Acts in a friendship generally had to demonstrate a sacrifice in some small measure – something that indicated that an individual was willing to commit some of their time and energy toward a friend. The form an act took need not directly reflect the strength of the relationship, but a grand overture might magnify the strength of a relationship if it was done appropriately. One of the most common examples I saw of this was a public 'big -up' on Facebook where an individual would post an extremely positive comment on a friend's profile page that extoled their virtues which would then be 'liked' by numerous people. But just as often a small act that demonstrated that an individual

'knew' the friend in question, such as a story that was related to their interests, was enough to sustain the relationship.

In their work on friendship Spencer and Pahl define a range of friendships based on degree of contact and what they describe as 'sense of presence' that includes 'active' friends defined by regular contact, through 'latent' friends with whom there was irregular contact to 'historical' friends where there was no contact (2006: 74). While the strict categorisation Spencer and Pahl's study illustrates was probably better conceived as a spectrum, it is fair to say that most of the friendships I encountered during my fieldwork fell into the first two categories. There were rare cases where a friendship was close to the 'historic' category, namely that between Simon and others in the network with whom there had been little face to face contact for a couple of years at the time of study, yet even here Facebook provided a way to sustain some form of contact that kept the friendship status alive.

The open-endedness of friendship, its performative veracity, also meant that the strengths of friendships might wax and wane, especially as new friendships were formed. Tom's friendship with Harry and Ted weakened, but his friendship with Anna, Chris and Nicola strengthened. A number of Kev's friendships almost vanished after his relationship with his girlfriend ended, but he strengthened friendship with people like Neil and others in his network who had previously been weaker ties. Michelle left London to go to university and established strong friendships there at the expense of those in London.

Whether the effect of this 'flexible' kind of friendship was positive or negative largely depended on what situation an individual was in at any moment in time. Kev for example felt extremely isolated when his friends sided with his ex-girlfriend, on the other hand Alva had plenty of friends who supported her when her boyfriend was deciding whether to continue their relationship or not. In either case, it was quite clear that in the network this situation was almost inevitable – every individual had many connections many of which were friends of different strengths and weaknesses – and that because few lived a conventional settled life the intensity of friendship with individuals in the network

might change with some frequency as people's circumstances changed. This was one of the reasons 'knowing' as an idiomatic term was so valuable because its ambiguity tempered the possibility for the axiomatic description of a friendship or other relationship. Ted could say he had 'known Tom for years' implying the strength of their relationship, even if they saw each other only infrequently. Alva could explain that Rose was not 'really' her friend so she could conceal information from her and avoid making an awkward situation even more awkward.

In the final half of this section I want to consider the more prescriptive features of friendship that revolved around autonomy and social distance and consider these factors in respect to the existing literature on friendship.

Autonomy features as a common theme in the literature on friendship and is often attributed a specifically 'Western' form of friendship where it is often given a position of primacy. For example, compare the following three definitions of 'Western' friendship from papers on the subject:

> "Friendship in our culture: autonomy (as opposed to ascription), unpredictability (as opposed to routinisation) and terminality (as opposed to open-endedness)" (Paine 1969: 521)

> "Western and particularly middle class friendship… [involves] autonomy, voluntarism, sentiment and freedom from structural constraints" (Bell and Coleman 1999: 10)

> "Friendship is… based on spontaneous and unconstrained sentiment or affection" (Carrier 1999: 21)

> "Is friendship a relationship characterized by autonomy, sentiment, individualism, lack of ritual and lack of instrumentality?" ask Killick and Desai (2010:1)

It should be evident too, from these definitions, that the kind of autonomy attributed to friendship is also commonly associated with other attributes such as 'sentiment', 'voluntarism' and 'affect'. In turn these characteristics tend to be located within specific developments of the 'self' in Western societies.

The latter is emphatically the case for the work of Carrier who locates the capacity for friendship in the development of an autonomous self that was capable of expressing authentic inner sentiment as opposed to a view that people were locations in structures or webs of relationships and (1999).

Although the anthropological work is careful to delimit this autonomous and voluntaristic notion of friendship to 'Western' contexts and is therefore concerned to avoid generalisations across cultures, and even expresses some scepticism about whether it is fundamentally true for 'Western' friendship, the literature on the whole is uncritical in regards to the association of autonomy and sentiment. In Desai and Killick's volume, for example, sentiment recurs as theme of friendship even in different cultural contexts where it is seen to offer an opportunity to express the emotive content of a relationship in contexts where relationships were normally formally prescribed (e.g. Desai 2010, Killick 2010).

It's not my intention to deny the role of sentiment in friendship. It should be evident that it was a common trait in the examples provided throughout this chapter. What I do wish to contest however is that sentiment was a condition of autonomy. Furthermore, I propose that for English friendships autonomy and sentiment were often contradictory forces rather than concomitants.

What I understand English friendship to be within the network context of the London gamers in this study is the recognition of the individuality of one person by another that creates the dyadic character of friendship. As I have demonstrated any individual invariably had a large number of connections that could be characterised as weak ties and these relationships were usually mediated by other people, so to recognise a relationship as dyadic in this context was significant. Although some people used the term 'friend' more expansively, a dyadic component in a relationship seemed to be the basis on which a 'strong' or 'real' friendship was acknowledged.

Importantly these acts did not necessarily require a great deal of sentiment, if the term is understood to be the disclosure of personal feeling as Carrier, Paine and others suggest. Because acts of that

produced friendship were performative, as long as they continued to express the recognition of individuality they need not involve much in the way of sentiment. The presence of sentiment in a friendship could, in fact, endanger the relationship if it was perceived as being too overbearing. This was apparent in the account of the tension between Tom and Harry earlier in section 3.4. where Harry felt that Tom was disclosing his feelings in an excessive manner to the extent that they were viewed as an imposition by Harry.

Personal information of this sort could be a burden as much as a privilege for English people and this was no different in friendship. Most London gamers only had one or two close friends with whom they regularly disclosed personal information and many didn't have anyone at all with whom they did this consistently, a pattern evident in other studies (Broadbent 2015). Anna and Chris, for example talked several times a week over the phone, these phone calls might last for over an hour and they would discuss 'a lot of personal stuff', as Anna put it. Anna would occasionally talk to her friend Cara about 'personal stuff' but she saw her more infrequently and then it tended to be on night's out where there were fewer opportunities to have a sustained conversation of this kind. But Ted admitted that he didn't really have anyone who he confided in regularly, although he also explained to me that he had "loads of mates who would 'have my back' if I needed them", a claim that Miler suggests is common for English people when questioned on the subject of intimate friendships (2015).

In this respect the sociological work of Allan (1989, 1996) and Spencer and Pahl (2006) is more nuanced in its willingness to acknowledge the way friendships may be subject to obligation as well as occurring within social settings that constrain the autonomy of individuals in friendships. Still, as the discussions in the previous sections of this chapter have demonstrated autonomy played a significant role in relationships in the network including even close friendships.

If friendship was defined by a dyadic bond that expressed a mutual recognition of individuality, then my understanding is that autonomy was a broader culturally prescriptive mode that cut across and shaped the form friendship could take. In this sense, unlike Paine who viewed friendship as a site

where autonomy flourished in social relationships because they were not subject to social surveillance (1969) or Carrier for whom autonomy made possible relationships founded on the exchange and disclosure of sentiment (1999), autonomy was a general feature of English sociality that expressed privacy and this pertained to friendship too.

For London gamers this was particularly true for public events within the network where people of varying degrees of social distance and proximity would be present. In these situations, even close friends had to prioritise practices of public sociality not simply to reproduce the collective norms relevant to the situation, but to obviate the discomfort personal conversation might cause to others.

For example, meeting people who were friends in pairs in a pub was an almost completely different experience to meeting them in a large group in a pub. A quiet pint with Tom or Michelle where we might share carefully considered opinions on the minutia of other individuals within the network became more physical, the conversations cruder and louder, personal disclosure put aside for the surface exchange of banter. Michelle would pull the most extraordinary faces. Insults flew. Ted and Harry would ceaselessly wind each other up. Tom would become grumpy and aggressive. If Sean showed up, which he often did in these situations, he would invariably get horrendously drunk. Kev would usually fall asleep at some point. Great care was made to ensure the public performance of friendliness was sustained otherwise the situation could become stilted and awkward causing much embarrassment for those present.

Yet close friendships would be reproduced in subtler ways – who sat together and who did not, which individuals did not talk to each other and the specific tone they might take. On one occasion all those present effectively split into two separate groups. Rapport provides a textured ethnographic account of a game of dominoes in an English pub where he describes the "transference of friendly intimacies" to the game and other material and spatial features provided by the bar (1999: 114). Opportunities would arise at these events for friends to temporarily seclude themselves from the collective, often by going to the bar or the toilet in pairs or going outside for to smoke a cigarette. Friendship then was

able to move in and out of the public and private registers which was an essential quality for the smooth-running of the guild in *World of Warcraft*.

3.9. Impersonalism and *World of Warcraft*

World of Warcraft was a vast public domain defined by the game's culture as a social space in which players were encouraged to interact. This entailed anything from the instrumentally oriented 'pick-up groups' (PUGs) where players between whom no previous relationships might exist who might barely communicate with one another to the banter that took place in the public 'chat channel' where players engaged in conversations that ranged from topics directly related to the game to the utterly nonsensical. These kinds of topics intermingled with questions about the game, 'adverts' from guilds seeking new players and people buying or selling in-game items that forced players to select which lines of conversation they wanted to follow and which to ignore.

Players might express outrage or delight in this channel, personal perspectives about the game and other players in it were frequently expressed and criticised but the information disclosed in this space remained appropriately 'public'. Personal information was not revealed and if an individual conveyed information that appeared to be personal in nature it would usually be viewed as a joke or treated as such and was quickly appropriated into the meaninglessness of banter.

In its own peculiar way this reflected the 'social rules' of the game that sought to uphold its architectural integrity. If *World of Warcraft* was a multiplayer game a community of players was a requirement and if those players had to amuse themselves in 'down time' through banter, better that than 'drama' that could threaten to derail the whole endeavour. Given that much of the background hum of its sociality was concerned with the details of the game it was an entirely appropriate form of impersonal interaction.

This did not entirely preclude the communication of private information. The game also offered 'private' dyadic channels where players could exchange more personal information, and technologies

that were external to the game such as voice software were also used for this purpose. But a distinct boundary was defined around the presence of this kind of information in the game – the world of private information effectively ran parallel to the public domain of the game and the former was constrained from leaking into the latter. Occasionally a 'miss tell' (MT) would reveal the otherwise invisible presence of the private domain. 'Miss tells' occurred because players would often be involved in multiple text conversations at the same time and these were usually located in the same field of a player's interface. Types of message was distinguished by colour – private was violet and thus distinct from the white, green and orange colours of the text for public channels of communication. On odd occasions a player might type a private response into a public channel, a *non sequitur* that momentarily betrayed the other world's existence, but for all intents and purposes this boundary was impermeable, a normative procedure that the game's architecture was used to legitimise.

In the open world of the game anonymity tended to prevail between players and players appeared to revel in the freedom this offered. This sense of freedom was employed by many to say things in a public space that they would not were their personal identity apparent, but for many freedom was simply experienced in the possession of anonymity that restricted the flow of personal information.

While this state of anonymity could go unchallenged in the open game world, it was a different matter for guilds. Guilds in *World of Warcraft* were semi-private organisations into which individuals had to be invited to participate. While guilds were technologically facilitated in the game as formal institutions the specific means by which they were managed was left to players. Helkpo, like most guilds, consisted of people between whom stronger, more intimate relationships endured and those that were characterised by weaker, more distant ties. Friendship and pre-existing relationships were an important connecting tissue in *World of Warcraft*, but the paradox was that although some of the most committed and enduring members tended to be bonded by ties of friendship the guild could not fulfil its goal as a raiding guild without recruiting players who were little more than strangers to the majority of members even if these individuals could lay claim to a stronger relationship with a small

number of existing members. The former tended to remain active in the game for longer and were more likely to return even if they did stop playing, while the latter were more likely to leave after short periods of time and were less likely to return. It was also the case that individuals who began as the latter could become more like the former. Those characterised by closer ties also tended to be a minority, while those with weaker ties the majority. Although not strictly the case, those with weaker ties tended to join for more instrumental reasons, usually the desire to raid, even if the proposed social promises the guild made appealed to them.

So, although Helkpo consisted of anything between ten and fifty active members at any one time, at an administrative level the guild was maintained through times of plenty and times of scarcity by friendships that existed beyond the game in some form, even if some of them had originated in it. Much of the guild's enduring success was attributable to the existence of friendships between members. In Helkpo's early months Harry, Tom and Tim along with two other players, Jewlz and Rubby, who had been members of The Tempest in its final days maintained the guild forum and a presence in the game.

Later, from around late 2012 to the time of writing the guild was maintained by three players all of whom had initiated their current relationships in the guild and then continued them beyond the game – Chris, Anna and Tom. Tom in this respect remained one of the most enduring guild members but not consistently. On one occasion he actually 'quit' the guild and on several occasions he stopped playing even though he technically remained a guild member. There was no doubt that he was one of the most emotionally committed members of Helkpo, who often expressed strong and occasionally hostile views about the attitudes of others towards the guild.

Friendship then had accomplished the guild's existence even when active membership consisted of only a handful of players at times when there were few shared activities, such as raiding, to entice strangers or those related by weaker ties who were less committed to the guild.

This combination of people between whom strong social ties existed and those with almost non-existent ties produced predictable tensions. How were newcomers to a guild integrated into a semi-private organisation defined by pre-existing personal relationships?

The literature on *World of Warcraft* guilds has demonstrated that guild membership entailed both privileges and duties oriented to the guild (Williams et al 2006, Taylor 2006, Chen 2012). In some cases, especially for guilds whose primary, if not exclusive, concern was raiding, this would be explicitly stated in writing, what Williams *et al* refer to as 'mission statements' (2006). Guilds of this status, then, were intentionally conceived as holistic entities that were greater than the sum of their parts, as is often the case for organisations (Douglas 1986) and therefore differed from the kind of incidental holism of the network discussed in the previous sections.

In recruitment posts, messages left on a range of *World of Warcraft* related forums that sought to entice new members to apply, the guild leaders and officers described the guild in the following way:

> Helkpo – casual raiding guild looking for raiders and entertainers

> We do pretty well for a guild as laid back as us

> That's our thing: we're a social guild, we're relaxed, and we raid. We have very casual members, and also members with more hardcore backgrounds; both are fine and dandy, and very much welcome.

Our long-serving members are evidence of the social side of this guild: annual guild meets in members' homelands, and mini-meets in between for anyone who can keep up.

On the guild forum and within the game the guild's outlook and rules were stated in more detailed form and some, such as access to the contents of the guild's shared 'bank' were controlled by the game's code and could be modified to allow more or less access depending on the rank of the player.

What guilds sought to do with these kinds of statements and sets of rules was to produce a kind of organisational duty that sought to engender a form of 'bureaucratic morality' that expressed "its own distinct ethic of existence" (du Gay 2000: 29) in its members such that personal goals were marginalised. In the literature on MMOs this kind of depersonalisation is normally associated with the most hardcore guilds who were viewed as almost exclusively focused on the instrumental goals set by the game (Taylor 2006, Williams et al 2006), but this is something of an oversimplification.

Although raiding was the main activity towards which Helkpo directed its attention it was, as the recruitment post above states, also a 'social guild'. Within its ranks there were always 'casual' members who did not raid, or have any intention of doing so, alongside raiding members. Yet despite the presence of these players the guild maintained an organisational form that emphasised de-personalisation. So to answer the question - how were newcomers to a guild integrated into a semi-private organisation defined by pre-existing personal relationships? – the response is that a critical part of the process of asserting an ethos of impersonalism as an expression of commitment to the guild was that pre-existing ties were marginalised. That is that although close bonds existed between Tom and Harry and Ted and Anna, Chris and Tom as players in *World of Warcraft* they were subject to the same rules and procedures as any other member of the guild who demonstrated the same level of commitment.

If we took friendship to be about unbridled sentiment (Carrier 1999) or defined by autonomy to act freely within a friendship (Paine 1969) then it would have been very difficult for guild members who were friends to reconcile their relationship within the de-personalised environs of the guild. But because friendship was subject to responsive to how a domain was defined, in terms of it being more or less private or public, it was able to adapt to the changing status of the guild. During 'quiet' times, often between the end of raid content in one expansion and the introduction of a new expansion Helkpo effectively became a private space where Marc, Anna, Tom and Nicola and a small number of others could express their friendship. That is the act of playing World of Warcraft when there was technically 'nothing to do' constituted a small act of commitment to friendship.

On these occasions communication would take place almost exclusively over voice software bypassing the public channels of the game's interface and other public spaces like the forum would be virtually deserted. Yet as soon as the raiding began these private dispositions were promptly put aside and the guild would become an almost exclusively public domain and private dyadic forms of communication would be relegated to the parallel private domain. Personal relationships would be de-personalised and 'official duties' as players who were defined by their actions within the game would commence.

The analogies to the bureaucratic principles of 'official duties' where "bureaucracy segregates official activity as something distinct from the sphere of private life" (Weber 1946: 197) are not accidental. As the last chapter explained, players drew on familiar bureaucratic concepts because they were conceived as effective ways to achieve organisational goals. Bureaucracy also expressed a form of control – of the certainty of outcomes and the means by which certainties could be made more probable.

The last chapter also explained that within *World of Warcraft* there was a prevailing view that players were unpredictable and unreliable in performance across the game, a feature of these contingent

forms was also the belief that the personal and private was similarly generative of uncertainties that could jeopardise performance in the game. The process of de-personalisation then was not just an organisational practice but was framed within the broader set of engagements players attributed to the rules. A problem that might seem to emerge from a commitment to impersonalism is that it would seem to preclude the possibility for the kind of sociality required for a 'social guild', but this was not the case. What it made possible was the kind of surface sociality that was deemed appropriate for the game's architectural and social rules and the desire for an English public sociality that even if it did not entirely preclude the personal and private legitimised formal ways of producing social distance.

3.10. Finding the Player

The principal symbolic move that produced impersonalism was the enactment of a separation between 'player' and 'person' – a literal act of de-personalisation that was achieved through the effective severance of relationships constituted by partial and indeterminate forms of 'knowing' and the establishment of relationships constituted by the absolute 'knowledge' players attributed to the game. This process was also managed by the assertion of a boundary between the game and what was termed 'real life'.

The term 'real life', more commonly abbreviated to 'RL', was a common expression for players in *World of Warcraft* and remains an example of a problematic term for social scientists studying games, particularly when given to questioning the conventions asserted in some of gaming's foundational studies – such as Huizinga's 'magic circle' (1950) or Caillois' claims that games are separated in both space and time from the day to day flow of life (1961). In much recent literature the hermetic qualities of boundaries alleged for games have been challenged. Economist Edward Castranova has argued that these boundaries are porous enough to allow the to-and-froing of peoples' time and labour (2004, 2007) and Bonnie Nardi suggests that within the 'magic circle' of World of Warcraft that otherwise wasted time could be transformed into the production of "social capital and emotional wealth" (2010:

115) and that the game represented "a smaller, more perfect universe" (ibid: 120) that greatly improved an individual's chances to achieve a sense of mastery.

There was an abundance of evidence that *World of Warcraft* was in some sense only a 'semi-bound' entity (Malaby 2007) and it was perfectly reasonable to see the continued use of 'RL' as a convenient and familiar anachronism for anything that was 'not *World of Warcraft'* (or any other online game). The term was more than convenient however, its use retained a significant descriptive value: when used, 'RL' was presented as a homogenous, 'other' space and this reflected the way that for the most part the lives of players were seldom elaborated on in personal detail. Individuals might share minor details about themselves on subjects such as their preferred musical genres, other videogames they had played, films they had enjoyed and occasionally conversations about political figures or events (but less often politics *per se*) would occur, but this was always in the form of banter not what would by convention be described as personal information.

But the process by which this de-personalisation was achieved was not a given, it had to be accomplished and at sites where the boundary between game and 'RL' was at its most delicate this had to be frequently negotiated and restored. In this section I examine how the guild forum as one of these sites in particular the section where players could apply to become guild members and how de-personalisation was defined and legitimised.

It was common practice for guilds that aspired to raid to have their own online forums where members would organise raiding and other activities, discuss the direction of the guild and other administrative activities such as 'recruitment' and also provide spaces for the discussion of more informal subject matter. Guild forums were usually divided between sections that were publicly and privately accessible. Helkpo's forum more or less conformed to this structure, comprising three main sections titled 'Helkprivate', 'Helkpublic' and 'Helkextras', a section added in 2012 for members who no longer

played *World of Warcraft* but had setup Helkpo guilds in other MMOs such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Guild Wars 2*, of which only the 'Helkpublic' section was visible to non-members.

One of the most important sections within the 'Helkpublic' section was that for 'membership requests'. This was where players who were not members of the guild could apply to join. The process of application required a player to submit an account of themselves by providing answers to a range of questions laid out on a thread in this section of the forum titled 'Helkpo Application Form'. That the name given to this series of questions should use the term 'form', a direct reference to the various paper documents familiar from everyday bureaucratic encounters was no accident. In as much as form filling in most encounters with bureaucracy requests that an individual provide some kind of account of themselves it was as unremarkable as any similar exercise. Applicants were asked questions about their prior experiences in *World of Warcraft* – which guilds they had been members of, what character class and class role/s they currently performed, what they enjoyed about the game, and a host of questions posed to elicit the applicant's potential 'fit' with the guild. What was more interesting was *who* was being asked to account for themselves and *to whom*.

It is common for studies of social relations in *World of Warcraft* and other MMOs to point out that many of those who play together in or outside of guilds also have some kind of relationship beyond the game (Taylor 2006b, Williams et al 2006). In Schiano *et al*'s quantitative study 69% of female players and 71% of male players on EU servers claimed to play with friends and 11% and 16% with co-workers respectively (2010). Williams *et al* note that guilds (around 50% in their study) employ 'formal' practices such as the use of 'mission statements' and 'vetting processes' and that this is more likely to be the case for raiding guilds even though referrals include a "large number of real-life friends and family" (2006: 349). They attribute the reason for this to the common goals the members of guilds share. While all this was true enough, what these studies have failed to emphasise is the degree to which shared goals required negotiation and repeated clarification and that the formal practices of

guilds in regards to 'recruitment' – who was and who was not permitted to join – rubbed up against the expectations of less formalised relational practices. The whole practice of application to guilds seems to have become so commonplace in academic studies of MMOs that its novel and remarkable qualities have tended to be overlooked. On the basis of my analysis of five years of applications to join Helkpo, of which there were over 170, over 40% of these applicants claimed to have a 'real life' relationship with an existing member of the guild. Although the process of 'formal' application was a necessary, if not guaranteed, precondition for membership in the guild, due to the high number of 'friends of friend' (or 'FoF' as they were referred to) applications the process was sometimes treated as little more than a formality. At several points the guild forum was inundated with 'FoF' requests and under these circumstances more established members had to re-assert boundaries around what kind of relationships were appropriate for the guild.

For example in late 2010 following the release of the Cataclysm expansion the numbers of applications to join Helkpo spiked and several of these applicants claimed to 'know' Ted as a reason for applying to join Helkpo as opposed to another guild. A couple of guild members commented on this, including one of the officers, Rubby, and Tom, the former joking that the guild should be renamed 'Ted and Helkpo'. Although Rubby's opinion was intended to be humorous, Ted appeared quite aware that this situation could be construed as inappropriate practice and later in a discussion with other members including Harry and Tom, he became quite defensive stating "yes, because inviting people that you are also friends with is a bad thing, especially since they've been playing for as long as you or I". In this statement Ted sought to shift the categorisation of these applicants away from 'friends' to 'players', and competent players at that, who just happened to be friends. Ted also suggested that several of Harry's friends had also applied to be members of the guild and that one of the applicants – Vic - who claimed Tim as a friend was also a friend of Harry's.

In response Harry submitted that "that's not really true. I don't know most of them, only Nigel and Sean. I have spoken to Vic more on Facebook than RL and the others I have never met". In this instance Harry demonstrated a typical act of social distancing made possible through the idiom of 'knowing' where an individual was able to stress distance or proximity to others with whom a relationship existed depending on the circumstances they found themselves in in regards to others. Although Harry did not feel that he could describe his relationships with Sean and Nigel in terms of distance because he knew them from the clubbing scene, he felt able to claim that because his relationship with Vic took place principally through Facebook it did not constitute as a relationship of proximity. Although at a later point in the debate he did claim to 'know' Vic 'IRL' (in real life), emphasising the elasticity and ambiguity 'knowing' articulated. In this respect we can see how Tim attempted to do something similar when he framed his relationship with the applicants he claimed to know him as players and not as friends, which was an action that produced social distance.

During the conversation Harry felt that he had to repeat his concerns to Tim and qualify them in more detail, explaining that:

> "Length of time playing isn't an issue or a requirement, and doesn't have anything to do with anything. It's a real 'friend of a friend' thing that we've been doing. If it's just someone I know and they want to join, then it's still a real app with a real chance of rejection. The 'friend of a friend' thing isn't just a backdoor into the guild. The 'friend of a friend' thing is for people who would like to join and be 'socials', i.e. none of them are going to be raiders come Cata[clysm] unless they speak to me or Jewlz about changing their status. Which is why I don't have any problem with these people being in guild, because all of them are social with everyone else in the guild. But the moment it becomes cliquey then we won't do it."

What we see in Harry's detailed argument is the establishment of boundaries around forms of sociality that were and were not considered appropriate in *World of Warcraft*. It was impossible to sever the relationships individual guild members had with others external to the guild – in many respects the architecture of the game encouraged and enabled this - but it was expected that these relationships would change when they crossed the game's threshold.

The status of 'social' that Harry referred to reflected a kind of 'liminal' position where the kinds of activities a player could participate in were constrained so that full engagement with the architectural experience of the game was otherwise closed off to performance. It was a status defined by its dependence on relationships defined by 'knowing' rather than the objective 'knowledge' of the game, the latter being a privilege exclusive to those defined as 'raiders' which expressed a more profound relationship with the system of the game. One of Harry's concerns with the supposed prevalence of relationships between guild members based on ties established in 'real life' was that it could become a 'clique', a relationship type seen to contradict the expansiveness of sociality the architecture of *World of Warcraft* made possible. A 'clique' described a community determined exclusively by relations of proximity rather than distance, in which inclusion was highly restrictive and, with respect to the ambitions of raiding guilds, almost certainly an obstruction. It was also the case that these social relations were not based on an appropriate degree of social distance and were therefore not accountable to any formal means of assessment.

This has some implications for the nature of social capital often ascribed to MMOs and 'virtual worlds'. The transformative capacities of social capital and the related resources – economic and cultural capital - have been most successfully articulated by Thomas Malaby with respect to the productive possibilities of digital goods (2006b), but the weakness of these terms is that they often lack substantive attributes or they fail to describe 'content' and are restricted to a hierarchical and homogeneous value of 'more' or 'less'. This is particularly true where social capital is concerned. An

individual like Tim 'knew' many people – Tom archly complained that he had "516 Facebook friends, so expect a lot of applications soon" – but this high level of social capital was not really the issue, the problem was the form that this social capital took or could take and which expressed its value.

The individuals that constituted this social capital had to demonstrate the possibility for re-valuation, to impress with the correct performance as a player, not a 'friend'. One of Harry's criticisms of Vic's application was that he had used his 'real life' name in its title rather than the name of his *World of Warcraft* character. While the name 'Vic' had value and meaning to Tim – a name constituted a baseline familiarity of 'knowing' – it had no value or meaning as such to the other members of Helkpo. A character name provided the opportunity for comment because it was seen as the outcome of player choice – a name viewed as clichéd was an opportunity for mockery, an obscure name the possibility for respectful acknowledgement – that comprised opportunities for banter but an 'RL' name was too personal to be the legitimate subject of derision or celebration, it spoke of intimacies, personal information, that was otherwise excluded from the game. In other words, it was a failure of performance. To the majority of guild members, a friend of someone else was a category devoid of determinative information.

The function of the application form was to provide relatively general information about the applicant as a player – what they had achieved in the game, what character class they preferred to play, what their responses to common in-game problems would be and so on. One of the problems with applications by friends is that they were often short on information of this kind and this was seen in a negative light by guild members because it was viewed that the applicant assumed that the existence of a relationship with a guild member was all that mattered. As I have demonstrated this was usually the case within the network were a friend of a friend was the basis on which some kind of relationship could be established, but within *World of Warcraft* the capital imbued in this kind of relationship was of limited value.

3.11. Mechanographic Accounts

Part of the application process and an overall effect of the symbolic move from person to player was the production of a particular form of accountability. Within the network I described in this chapter I explained that accountability was weak, largely because to ask an individual to account for an action was often viewed as intruding into an individual's private domain. As such trust as a faith in the goodwill of others filled the gap where more explicit kinds of information was absent.

In *World of Warcraft* a player was defined as a subject by more absolute and finite forms of knowledge that could be more easily held to account because a player was an exclusively public subject. Because of this virtually everything a player did was legitimately public and could be transformed into public information because of the boundary that was accomplished between the game and 'RL'.

Amongst other things 'real life' was construed as the domain in which personal and private information circulated and the introduction of 'RL' information into the domain of World of Warcraft was often associated with 'drama'. In his ethnography of *World of Warcraft* Mark Chen describes drama as conflict between players that threatened shared group goals (2012: 146), the problem drama presented in Helkpo was not so much a matter of the conflict itself but what conflict caused people to say about others and therefore the things they might reveal about themselves considered private and therefore out of place in the game.

Conflict between players was not uncommon, was usually resolved quickly and with no lasting consequences, and seldom endangered the guild's existence. What it did do was generate an overwhelming sense of awkwardness that players sought to avoid. The accounts players provided about themselves accorded with this expectation. One of the questions of the 'membership application' asked applicants to 'tell us a little about yourself in the world outside of WoW…' – but the emphasis was on 'a little', typical examples would read:

"I work for Royal Mail. I like cars, football, roleplay, Star Wars Lego and David Gemmell. Not necessarily in that order....."

"My name is Pete I am a 40 year old male from the UK. My English is bad as I am from Liverpool, I have 4 kids ranging from twins of 5 to my son of 10."

This question was more of a formality than anything of significance and no 'deeper' information was requested. Guild members left or took 'breaks' with regularity and a thread in the private section of the guild forum was dedicated to 'absentees' where they voluntarily submitted a reason for their absence. These accounts were typically short and produced little specific information:

"For the first time in nearly five years my account won't be active from the 28th. I haven't been able to play for a fair few weeks now and I don't see myself being able to play much in the next few either as I have a lot of assignments due in. Will definitely be reactivating my account though when I have time to play WoW again and am not being swamped by college/assignments/work/socialising."

"Sorry, lots of shit, game time ran out, found out it's still running but moving along with no internet for a few weeks

Ciao

P.S. Sorry I am a couple of months late with this"

"Love you all, but I've decided to cancel my subscription for a while. No reason to pay for a game I don't play at all! Back later

/AFK"

Although it rarely occurred, a player who left the game and gave detailed and personal reasons why they chose to do so was fare more likely to cause affront and prompt 'drama'. One guild member, Ella, began a new thread in the 'private chat' channel on the forum in which she explained in far more

detail than was normally the case her reason for leaving the guild. The excerpt below sums up the gist of her account:

> "I'm sure you've noticed that WoW became less appealing to me lately. And I'm sorry to say it, but there's nothing in Helkpo atm [at the moment] that can sway that feeling. Guild chat is quiet, even with 7 members online there's only 1 replying to my hearty hello when logging. People complain we lack members, and yet no-one… has even asked me why I played less or told me to hurry the fuck up with reaching 90… The fact that I was offended by those comments, even though I know that I shouldn't, proves that Helkpo is not my place anymore. I couldn't take it as a joke, a sign for me that I really don't feel good in this guild anymore, at least not in this particular game."

Responses to this post on the forum varied from conventionally polite commiserations to more belligerent responses. Ella's decision to leave took place early in the new Mists of Pandaria expansion and during this time the usual collective activities of raiding guilds were put on hold as players had to level their characters up to the new maximum level threshold – in this case from level 85 to 90. During this time, then, guild members tended to be less communicative because their attention was focused on what was normally a solitary activity. In part this was because there was pressure on guild members to 'level up' relatively quickly in order that the guild could start raiding, but it was also the case that people felt that this a more private activity and Nicola, one of the most diplomatic members, explained that she had not wanted to 'disturb' Ella while she was levelling her character by way of explaining her own apparent lack of sociability.

These examples demonstrate the way that social rules were employed to define a normative sociality for players within *World of Warcraft* that expressed boundaries between public and private. Certain information was considered too private and personal to be shared in this way and great effort was made to marginalise these kinds of accounts. When they did occur a guild leader would usually step in and request that the issue be taken up through a 'private message' – a dyadic and exclusive form

of communication in the game or on the forums. In these circumstances guild leaders held to a kind of 'Hippocratic oath' and withheld the information from the majority of guild members, sharing it only with senior 'officers' if at all.

The public face that was presented by Helkpo was an organisation where expressions of personal information were not a constitutive part of the domain of *World of Warcraft* and, framed as 'drama', it was always referred to in pejorative terms. To contradict this would be to fail to comprehend what it meant to perform as a player. As Helkpo members were often reminded, *World of Warcraft* was 'just a game' and should not be taken seriously, a strategic employment of the view that as genre of activity games were inconsequential as argued by academics like Caillois (1961). The game's architecture itself factored in this delineation of public space. In the first instance the symbolic implications of its fantasy setting were less concerned with immersion into the fantasy world (see next chapter) than it was a convention for separating the 'real' – that which matters – from the 'non-real' – that which does not. A convention which was paralleled by conceptions of the 'private' and the 'public'. It was, however, primarily through the formalisation of knowledge within the game and about players that made it possible to produce a legitimate boundary between the public, knowable player and the private, unknowable person.

The first example I provide concerns the way that a person could only enter the game through the mediation of a 'character' and this character was realised through a constrained and definitive set of properties, notably a 'name', a faction, a 'race', a 'class' and a set of numeric signifiers such as 'level' that entered a player into a comprehendible matrix of knowledge. A player's character effectively disclosed knowledge about that individual as a player and this was the reason it was considered important for applicants to complete membership forms using their main character. It was also important that an applicant was willing to commit his main character to the guild as this was the most reliable index of knowledge about the player. Although players invariably had multiple characters

('alts'), guild leaders worked hard to ensure that players had to commit to a specific character for the purposes of raiding and a player usually had to request permission to change that status.

A players' 'character' provided a starting point for what Mary Douglas terms a 'forensic resource' (1992: 24) with which an individual could be held accountable. Unlike a paper document, the conventional bureaucratic media for records of identity, the 'character' was a malleable entity that responded dynamically to many of the actions a player took that had state-changing consequences within the game. Scholarly work on bureaucratic paper documents has demonstrated that in practice the authority of these papers, otherwise attributed so much power in the work of Weber, is often diminished (Nuijten 2003, Blanchette 2012, Hull 2012). In Nuijten's study of Mexican *ejidatarios* the hope invested in maps and other cadastral documents that alleged to represent and legitimise their claims to land were thrown into turmoil when the very existence of such maps, let alone their veracity, was challenged (2003). In Hull's study of bureaucratic practices in Islamabad the evidentiary value of a document was modulated by other forms of authority, such as the signatures of particular officials and like the maps of Mexican *ejiditos* could be undermined simply through 'loss' (2012). Blanchette's account of the attempts of cryptographers to develop a secure digital signature bears the most relevance here because of its focus on digital technologies. Yet Blanchette suggests that the malleability of electronic documents and the greater opportunity that presented to change them poses significant challenges to their authorial validity (2012). But here the flexibility of the digital document that constituted a player represented a more potent evidentiary form.

This was not due to some inherently digital quality of the documentary trail a player produced, but was a consequence of the direct relationship this document had with the game's architecture, which as we have seen was conceived as a thoroughly knowable object. Players had always been constituted through the game's architecture as accessible public documents, so for example by right-clicking on a character profile in the game other players could access information about the character including the gear they wore, details about the guild they belonged to, their PvP activity and the class spec they

played, but this documentary quality became even more significant following two key changes to *World of Warcraft* that enabled them to function in an even more determinative manner.

Initially character information could only be accessed by another player who was logged into the game, but the addition of 'The Armory' (later incorporated into the Battle.net 'community' site) changed this. The Armory was a website developed by Blizzard which pulled data directly from the *World of Warcraft* servers and produced increasingly more detailed information about characters, including the raiding experience they had and the most recent items of gear they had obtained. The second significant change to the game was the revelation of 'item level' better known as 'ilvl'. 'Ilvl' expressed a numeric value of items which was determined by their statistical qualities. This metric was an important part of the game's code and mechanics, along with other attributes such as 'item id' and 'itemequiploc', as it enabled the item to function with certain game mechanics. In this case, amongst other functions, it determined the levels at which a character could first 'use' an item.

It was not Blizzard's intention for 'ilvl' to be visible to players, it was simply one piece of digital information amongst many that defined the items players used in the game. This changed with the creation of an 'addon' called 'Gearscore' in 2009 that not only made 'ilvl' visible to players through the game's interface, but designed the addon to aggregate the ilvl numbers of each item of gear a player possessed into an overall 'gear score' that represented the player as a sum of the items. At the time this addon became popular it was deemed highly controversial because in the eyes of some players it reduced more complex measures of accountability to a single numerical score, yet on the whole it proved very popular and eventually became an integral part of the game and the identity of a player. This was partially because it simplified the process by which raid and dungeon group leaders could determine whether a player should be considered for these activities, but the primary reason was that it produced what was believed to be a more reliable form of accountability because it bypassed the account a player would give of themselves.

As issues about the identities and the connections of those who applied to the guild continued to be problematic, applicants to the guild were increasingly asked to provide links to their 'Armory' page in order that some external and systematic source of verification could be considered. Human produced knowledge was viewed as partial, subjective and malleable, a numerical score calculated on the basis of the game's 'underlying' systems by comparison was seen to be more complete and importantly universalistic knowledge - the same criteria could be applied to any player making accountability a comparable measure. Here I use the term 'mechanographic' as a cognate to the term 'autograph' to describe this form of accountability. As the latter acquires its authenticity from its indexical association with a specific individual, so the former acquires it authority as a by-product of a digital system. Mechanographic accounts then superseded player produced information as a more reliable evidentiary representation of a player that could be accessed as a public record.

The legitimacy of these forms of accountability was not accepted immediately. As I have stressed, the architecture of the game did not in and of itself determine the game culture, it had to be legitimised by that culture. Members of Helkpo expressed some degree of ambivalence at the time of Gearscore's appearance, in part because it so quickly altered the way in which players interacted and the wider fabric of in-game sociality – a continuation of the changes noted in the ethnographies of Nardi (2010) and Chen (2012). Many of the complaints directed at it partook of a discourse in which the 'skill' of players was differentiated from the 'gear' worn by their characters. 'Skill' was understood to be either an inherent or learned capacity constituting a general level of mastery of mechanics and encounters that emphasised the active application of knowledge in performance. 'Gear' on the other hand represented the baseline performative output a player could be expected to produce with the least input or knowledge of how to play, and in this sense any kind of mastery was attributed to the performance of the system.

This was more generally bound up with forms of sociality that had, at least ideally, been qualified on the basis of 'knowing'. As noted last chapter by the time of the release of the Cataclysm expansion in

late 2010 the phase of 'interpretive flexibility' had passed and ilevel as a player metric had become a fundamental part of the game, in this case quite literally. In Cataclysm a new numeric score was added to the character profile window that was an essential part of the game's basic interface – this was called 'average item level' and fulfilled a similar function to 'gearscore' in that it aggregated the 'ilvl' of each item of gear a character wore. Prior to this, item level had been used as an architectural and therefore concealed mechanic to determine if a character was eligible to participate in automated group content, but now through its visibility it acquired a role as an important mediator of collective activity.

Within Helkpo it altered the way decisions were made about who was eligible to raid and those who wished to do so were required to meet the advised minimum threshold for 'average ilevel'. 'Ilvl' did not necessarily entirely replace the accounts players gave of themselves but it was considered to have greater evidentiary value as an index of a player's experience and a character's ability. In Douglas's terms it represented an indisputable forensic trail (1992) that was difficult, if not impossible for a player to manipulate. Significantly certain predictive qualities were also attributed to this score, so that a raid group felt more confident about their chances of success the higher the average level of ilevel scores were.

Fears expressed by players at the time of the emergence of Gearscore that it would completely replace other forms of social interaction while not entirely unfounded were deeply exaggerated. For example, In Helkpo if an individual who had just joined the guild or had not raided for some time wished to participate in guild raiding but had an average ilevel score considered too low, collective efforts would often be made to rectify this by offers to 'run' lower difficulty level dungeons and raids. It is important to note, however, that 'ilevel' was viewed as a zero-sum qualification – a player either had the minimum level or higher or they did not and this was expressed as an architectural constraint, not a matter of subjective opinion.

In broad terms, in World of Warcraft, texts, numbers and other outputs that were mechanographically generated were granted more authorial validity than those produced by players. The faith players had in this system was demonstrated through the way 'scammers' attempted to emulate the system's mechanographic forms in order to convince others that they were of official status. Scammers were players who attempted to extract private information from other players in order to 'steal' their game account. It was not uncommon for players to receive in game 'whispers', private messages, that purported to be from Blizzard employees that informed the individual that some issue had been detected with their account. Accompanying the message would be a web address that the player would be directed to where they were advised to 'log in' in order to solve the problem. The aim was for the player to provide their account details – user name and password – and having acquired this information the 'scammer' would then log into their *World of Warcraft* account sell all their items and transfer the gold to another character to be sold on to other players.

While the implications of these messages were portentous, they were usually viewed with a mix of contempt and mirth, principally because they had become so familiar as to be immediately recognisable as 'scams', but also because they betrayed their inauthenticity in what were deemed noticeably crude ways. An example read:

> [Blizzardit] whispers: [Game Master]GM: Hi Blizzard Entertainment notifies you. (Abnormal Account)! Please visit: www.eubattler.com. Sure that you are the original owner of the account. Or the system will suspend your account.

The first two words of the message were mechanographically generated, a player named 'Blizzardit' had sent a private message which automatically generated the text '[Blizzardit] whispers:', the scammer attempted to replicate the style of the machine generated text by typing in '[Game Master]GM:'. 'Game Master' was the name used by Blizzard customer service employees who operated within the game and whose job it was to deal with in-game issues. Here the scammer attempted to convey authenticity by making the text appear as if the 'Game Master' name had been

generated by the system, the existence of a second set of colons marks this section out as player produced text, however. Incorrect spelling and poor grammar were also usually cited as evidence of a scam message's inauthenticity as such failures were viewed as much more likely to be made by people rather than systems. For example, the official login website for World of Warcraft was 'eu.battle.net' not 'eubattler.com'. More generally, messages from Game Masters were prefixed by an official Blizzard logo graphic that could not be replicated by players that acted in effect as a form of 'signature' or badge of authority and veracity.

With regard to the legitimacy of this kind of mechanographically produced data in *World of Warcraft*, Taylor suggests that players were noticeably ambivalent (2006b). While I am in agreement with this as a general assessment, in my experiences ambivalence was expressed as a response to the misappropriate use of statistics rather than as general response to system produced numbers themselves. My feeling is that Taylor unduly obviates the specific significances of data and its evidentiary status. The way in which data was used was context dependent and judged as more or less appropriate, but if it was used in what was deemed the proper way it legitimised the basis of actions in the game. In other words, the numbers the game produced were fundamentally 'accurate', but their interpretation by players could be at fault.

Take a discussion I had with two guild members about the best specialisation of a class of character, for example. I was playing a Hunter character using the Survival (SV) specialisation. There were two other specialisation choices available, Marksman (MM) and Beastmaster (BM), and I had asked which the best choice to raid with was because I knew these players to be well-informed about the optimisation required for raiding. Alex responded "Hmm, SV is fine, I've played it a lot after the patch. It's just not as good, MM is the clear hard hitter" I thanked him for this and then another guild member, Frank, posted a link to a website called 'warcraftlogs' that compiled numerical data about the performance of different classes and class specialisations that numerically validated Alex's claim

that Marksman hunters were the best in terms of damage output. This prompted a debate about the validity of the meaning and validity of statistics in the game.

Frank: I won't go into that discussion, but statistics are statistics

Alex: Sims don't count for player skill, target switches etc. It's not real world data

Frank: true, but it can give a pointer to how a particular spec is working

At this point, Clarif, who happened to be logged into the game at the time joined the discussion explaining that:

Clarif: Warcraftlogs is nothing but real world data, tbh [to be honest]

Frank: my point exactly. But someone brought up sims. Apples/oranges etc. Nothing works in a vacuum, but there MIGHT be a reason "no one" plays SV this tier

The evidentiary status of data here was dependent on how it was understood to have been acquired and the kind of relationship it had with player behaviour. Mediation then was a key concern when it came to the status of data. Alex's concern that 'sims', simulations based on statistical calculations, didn't take into consideration 'player skill' was representative of the wider discourse that evinced the tension between the abstract capacity of numbers and their relationship to specific performative acts. The simulations he refers to were one of the products of the practice of 'theorycrafting', which name suggests, was concerned with identifying the optimum combination of character specialisations, talents and gear in terms of its role efficacy and optimisation – e.g. which ones did the most damage or healing.

The problem was that this was calculated externally to the game's system – which was viewed as "real world data" - rather than through the analysis of actual play. The veridical legitimacy of Warcraftlogs was grounded in what was perceived as its direct connection to the game's architecture and the aggregate choices of players not to opt for the weakest performing Hunter spec was understood to be

the inevitable indexical realisation of this architectural affordance. There was rarely any attempt to see the choices made by players as a consequence of normative social rules that were particularly effective at homogenising aspects of the game such as character class specialisation.

The numbers produced by *World of Warcraft*'s architecture therefore proved to be a powerful resource on which guild members drew to establish a boundary between accounts of players given by people and accounts provided by the game's architecture because of the stronger claims of proof attributed to it. Goffman, in his descriptions of how information is presented and inferred in social encounters, uses the term 'impression' to describe the way an actor in an encounter tries to 'impress' a desirable account of him or herself to an audience, some degree of this will be intentional and some unintentional and those parties privy to the encounter will also make and shape the impression give (1979). Mechanographically, information produced by the game's architecture impressed its own form of information onto players and produced a difficult to contest and 'objective' account, a baseline on which a player's performative history and potential could be judged.

Importantly this knowledge was hermetically sealed by the system, there was no possibility that it might be manipulated in a way that could avoid detection and because this knowledge was only absolute and universal in regards to the system it was not subject to the partial and contingent forms of knowledge to which accounts outside the game, in 'real life', were. As more architecturally generated information was produced in *World of Warcraft* so a greater conceptual and material bifurcation of player from person could be accomplished, producing a coherent public space of sociality that was in various ways insulated from the potential risks of the contingencies ascribed to the category of personhood and the revelation of information deemed too private.

The successful accomplishment of boundary-making *World of Warcraft* made possible in regards to prevailing conceptions of private information and more knowable forms of public information was not without consequences however. The finite, universal knowledge that applied to the domain of the

game always co-existed alongside other more contingent relationships and forms of knowledge and in certain cases the former could threaten to curtail the possibilities of the latter even when such an outcome was not desirable. A story that illustrates this issue concerns Pete, who lived in the UK and his fiancé, Malissa, also a member of the guild, who lived in Denmark. *World of Warcraft* was the place they came to in order to spend time together in lieu of being able to do so physically. The problem was that Pete wasn't being picked for raids, as he explained:

> "First of all me and Malissa, as I'm sure some of you know by now, are engaged and play this game together as something to do while separated in our home countries until we are ready to live together in the same one. So raiding with her is very important to me as I have little interest in actually doing anything else. However, due to work conflicting with the raid calendar I'm stuck on missing most of them. So I'm sure you can understand how annoyed I am when I actually get a chance to raid with her and it gets ruined by her having to work on Thursday and Sunday and [on other occasions] I'm completely passed up for reasons I can only assume are either loyalty or just because the other tanks are more active."

World of Warcraft was not the only constraint on Pete's life, he had a busy and irregular work schedule which often prevented him from playing when he wanted to. Yet, their commitment to one another required a commitment to the game, but because he was unable to play regularly this had impacted the speed with which he was able to obtain items that would give him the required 'ilevel' suitable for raiding. In this instance Anna's response to Pete's assertions was short and to the point:

> "I would say that I don't think loyalty has anything to do with being picked for raids. We are all aware that a certain level of iLevel is required. I know if I didn't have the gear or skill to support the current content I wouldn't be picked for a raid."

She makes it quite clear that the reason he was 'passed up' for raiding had nothing to do with the existence of personal relationships between other guild members and everything to do with the

indisputable fact that the 'average ilevel' of his gear was not adequate enough to raid. Ted also joined the debate, stating that it was inappropriate for an individual to expect other guild members to make compromises that would affect their chances of progressing through content and that this had nothing to do with friendships or relationships beyond the game.

Pete had acquired something of a reputation in the guild as an individual who brought too much of his 'private life' into the game. This was partly attributed to the fact that he and Malissa sometimes discussed or referred to their romantic relationship in public channels which was tolerated but treated with indifference and the fact that he sometimes became visibly and audibly upset and expressed his feelings on these matters. On several occasions Chris had discussed this issue with him and Pete and Malissa had left the guild and then re-joined it in response to these perceived infractions. Jewlz who had pretty much stopped playing *World of Warcraft* at this point added that, the:

> "Solution sounds fairly simple: find something else to do together. Come play Guild Wars 2 [another MMO] with us. Yeah, that sounds facetious, I know. But WoW will be WoW. To do progression raiding, you need the besterest gear or it's painful for all involved. If you play more, you'll have more (and therefore better) gear. I've no idea how much of the gear of raiding iLevel is available through non-raiding means, but if WoW is still the WoW I remember then it won't be enough to get you where you need to be."

On occasions such as this the way *World of Warcraft* was conceived could restrict sociality, its architecture could sever and obstruct relationships, in this case between Pete and his fiancé and between Pete and the other guild members, that were essentially prohibitive leaving little option for an individual but to stop playing and find some other media through which to engage with or indeed to find others with whom an individual could engage, which is exactly the advice that Jewlz gave.

But that was effectively the cost of the kind of 'bureaucratic indifference' (Herzfeld 1992) that the game culture generated. To admit one exception would be to invite further exceptions and with this

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the social contingencies that would accompany them. This was not simply a case of following the rules, the rules were an accomplishment that legitimised this kind of action as appropriate for a game where contingency, especially that located in player was seen to be problematic for the enactment of appropriate performance.

Guild members did not want to know who Pete was through the indeterminate forms of knowledge in which he framed his personal problems. There was no way to verify the account he supplied other than through the architecture of the game which stated in no uncertain terms that his character's ilevel was not high enough for him to participate in raiding. This knowledge was incontestable and therefore this was the 'Pete' that people in the guild knew *very* well and with whom there was little social distance. Technically, in a literal sense, the other Pete did not exist, he was lost in his network and could only be found as a player.

3.12. An Architecture of Englishness

The kinds of severances *World of Warcraft* enacted on relationships, the social distance it created and the proximities it enabled accomplished something else – the stabilisation of the cultural categories of public and private.

World of Warcraft was site defined by its public status, where, importantly, the disclosure of personal information could be legitimately shut-down and marginalized without further threatening these boundaries. It allowed a form of control over the practice of culture that required something as discrete as the boundary purported for a fantasy game and a system in which the unexpected actions of people were viewed as performative failures that could justifiably be corrected. The social awkwardness that characterised situations where the delineation between public and private was unclear for English people was precluded and the formality attributed to rules, both architectural and social, gave comfort that there was a 'correct' way to proceed.

The fluidity of networks outside the game was subject to a kind of 'boundary effect' (Strathern 1981) where the strength or proximity of a relationship was always subject to what was deemed acceptably public or unacceptably private. As Strathern explains for her ethnography of the English village of Elmdon, a core group of residents were able to describe themselves as 'true villagers', a highly exclusive and closed status that required an individual to be a member of one of a small number of families that claimed antique status and lead an almost exclusively village focused life, eschewing the world beyond. As Strathern points out, it was often the case that these self-same true villagers knew people beyond the village, including blood or affinal relations, but that they chose to play these down in public contexts in which village status mattered. As she puts it: "Among Elmdoners… certain kind connections are seen as creating a conceptually bounded entity… An identification with the village not only makes out of birth an affiliation to a seemingly closed group, but cuts across the personal networks of kin which people trace between their own and other villages" (1981: 202). The people in my study lacked such a clear symbolic boundary as the quintessential English village, yet they found other normative means by which to assert the existence of these boundaries in order to retain the duality of public sociality and private autonomy.

In asserting the stability of cultural categories and the relations of value that inhered in them, I hope to have demonstrated how *World of Warcraft* enabled a form of control that flowed through and was sustained by practice. We might understand this process in terms of what Sahlins refers to as an 'event' – an "empirical form" of a cultural systems potential" (1985: 153).

Sahlins recounts the colonial encounter between Captain Cook and the Hawaiians in the late 18th century as an example of the 'event' in which the responses of the Hawaiians, as strange as they appeared to the colonial onlookers, were responses accorded by their own customary practices "encompassing the extraordinary event in [of the encounter] in traditional cultural forms" (1985: 138). Cook and his crew were treated as 'divine strangers' and were gratified as such because Hawaiian women wished to establish connections with the divine. For the Hawaiian chiefs the encounter was

conceived through the structures of culture in terms of threat because in the Hawaiian accounts the 'stranger-kings' achieved power through the usurpation of the existing dynasty, and this caused chief Kaneoneo, who should have been first in everything, to pause and only take action after those over whom he ruled – "Cook's arrival in 1778 thus put in place a certain historical 'structure of conjuncture': a system of relationships destined to affect the further course of European trade and Hawaiian politics" (ibid: 139).

Sahlins' account demonstrates what he calls 'structural transformation' wherein cultural categories were submitted to risk in practice - where the deficiencies of the referentiality of action to the system it sought to reproduce marked out an inevitable process of change in which cultural categories and their relations were re-ordered. *World of Warcraft* in this instance was unusual because as an 'event', a contingent happening in the lives of London gamers, it enabled the reproduction of cultural categories in a more perfected form. It presented a culture legitimated through the games architecture in which the disclosure and exchange of personal and private information was viewed as inimical to proper performance in the game and where players mattered more than the person behind the screen and were the products of a system imbued with the notion of absolute and transparent knowledge.

This cultural system represented potent categories to London gamers who saw in them the possibility for an order in which the partial and indeterminate qualities of personal and the private information could be legitimately expunged from social interaction in the name of retaining a de-personalised domain of exclusive public sociality.

3.13. Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the nature of social relations amongst the London gamers through the network in which they were embedded and examined the tensions the dualism of English sociality

created within it. I then explained how social relations were reconfigured in the game culture of World of Warcraft and how these relations of values represented a more perfect form of Englishness.

Using the theories Simmel concerning I demonstrated how in social relations information about others was always partial and indeterminate and that this enabled the production of social distance which was essential for boundaries between public friendliness and private autonomy in English sociality. I then explored how the expansive social network through which the London gamers in my ethnography lived caused tensions regarding the disclosure of private information - that in the network information could develop a life of its own that threatened the public and private boundaries by bringing people into close proximity to private information. Even friendship, typically associated with the expression of sentiment, was subject to the English concern with privacy.

In the second half of the chapter I explained how in *World of Warcraft* a more decisive boundary was established between the public and private domains by marginalising the private and producing players as exclusively public entities whose prior relations were effectively cut through de-personalisation.

In the final section I argue that this achieved an idealised architecture of Englishness and suggest, with reference to Sahlins notion of the event that 'structural transformation' was capable of re-producing cultural categories rather than altering them.

CHAPTER 4. FANTASY AND THE PRODUCTION OF PRIVACY

8.1. Overview

The previous chapter detailed how *World of Warcraft* constituted a site of public sociality that expunged the private and personal, relegating them to a domain virtually invisible to the game world. Given that *World of Warcraft* was a 'fantasy' game, there has been little discussion of this subject so far. This was because the fantasy genre, which was popular amongst virtually all of my informants to varying degrees, was strongly associated with the most personal and private domains and experiences. The material evidence of it tended to be restricted to people's most private of spaces – the home. It was not a subject matter that was discussed by people in overtly social contexts and even amongst small numbers of people it was a topic that seldom arose.

One might have thought that given the fantasy setting of *World of Warcraft* some mode of collective action that expressed this interest in the genre would have emerged, but when it did, as was the case with the roleplayers I briefly touched on in Chapter 2, it tended to be marginalised and framed as an erroneous performance of the game. In private, fantasy was a quotidian and everyday imaginative process, but in the normatively public domain of *World of Warcraft* the imagination was given over to the construction of more rational engagements. In this chapter I attempt to explain why this was the case.

Here I make two arguments: the first, and probably the most controversial point develops from a trend evident across multiple disciplines, including anthropology, for studies to challenge the premise that, following Weber, modernity, however we may define it, is characterised by a state of disenchantment. I have, for example, referred to Natasha Dow Schüll's outstanding ethnography of gambling machines in Las Vegas several times and a core feature of her argument is that the opaque and imperceptible workings of gambling machines that fulfilled the desire of problem gamblers' access to 'the zone' is

an example of modern enchantment at work (2012). From a quite different discipline, in this chapter I discuss the work of Michael Saler who claims that the fantastical worlds created in the fictions of J.R.R. Tolkien, Arthur Conan Doyle and H.P. Lovecraft combined the rational and objective logic of Enlightenment thinking with the imaginary and the creative to produce a form of distanced 'ironic enchantment' that engaged and immersed its audience without ever ceasing to be an overtly fictional 'as if' (2012).

With its challenge to the exclusivity of Weber's 'instrumental rationality' as the driving force to capitalism's expansion, Colin Campbell's influential work, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), may be seen as a forerunner to this trend and his argument plays out over familiar territory – the space between the material world and the imagination – that clearly inspires Saler's work. The work of other academics with similar interests will be examined in this chapter including Pels (2003), Allison (2006) and Whitehead and Finnström (2013) and the claims made taken quite seriously.

If the volume of work in this vein is any indication we might not be remiss in thinking that enchantment is in fact a fairly mundane experience of modernity. Pels' argument that 'magic' and other terms that allude to the mystical or spiritual are in fact an invention of modernity, in part through the construction of the 'other' by early anthropologists (2003), strongly suggests that this position is tenable. The thrust of my first argument then is that, for the majority of my informants, 'enchantment' was a fairly ubiquitous experience and that the enchanted marginalised from public discourse was simply appropriated into the private domain in English culture. This fact alone may not be entirely surprising, but the possible consequences of its pervasiveness came to me as something of a surprise – that enchantment could be experienced as, if not 'boring', then just not as distinctive as might conventionally be credited.

The other line of thought set out in this chapter is concerned with the fantasy genre itself, in particular that the trajectory of its development since the 1970s in Britain and North America, has exhibited two tendencies: the first being the generation of an excessive volume of fantasy genre material across numerous different media (books, films, TV series, videogames, comics/graphic novels and toys) that has had an individuating effect on those committed to it; and second that it is prone to the generation of highly open-ended and indeterminate imaginative experiences. In both cases the effect was to make consumers of the fantasy genre more susceptible to 'geekiness' through the possession of obscure knowledge and that this knowledge was often seen as inappropriate for public domains.

Appreciation of why fantasy was private and individualistic aids our understanding of why it was marginalised in a game that appeared to be a 'fantasy' game and why the knowledge forms produced around the game exhibited a compelling collective quality which I argue was attributed to the universalistic and impersonal qualities it expressed, making it an ideal resource for banter, an exclusively public communication form that concealed personal and private information.

Both strands of the argument find their footing in a cultural agenda expressed through the duality of English sociality. The fantasy genre was not simply something individuals engaged with in solitary conditions, it constituted a fundamental part of an individual's sense of private selfhood, a mode of practice that constituted an extreme and idealised form of autonomy through its open-endedness. The condition of fantasy was not in any sense fundamental, but was an outcome of historical and material processes including a site for the development of childhood autonomy. When the knowledge it generated was used it tended to be in contexts of intimacy and implied a sense of trust between parties amongst whom the knowledge was exchanged. The potential for 'geekiness' that inhered in the obscure knowledge of the genre meant that it always had the potential to create social awkwardness, an alarming possibility within the logic of English sociality.

In this respect the fact that *World of Warcraft*'s commitment to the genre was more aesthetic than architectural was important in constituting the game as a public domain. But it also accounts for the way a transparent, rational system was considered legitimate grounds for concerted collective action. If everyday forms of mundane enchantment were bound up with the exercise of individual autonomy, then, in a kind of schematic reversal, this provided the rare opportunity to engage with the rational, making it an ideal site for the realisation of collective and social commitment.

8.2. The Concealment of Fantasy

Before I begin my analysis I recount a typical if pertinent experience from my fieldwork that illustrates the relationship between fantasy and the private domain.

On this occasion I had agreed to meet Anna and Kev, who at this time were romantically involved, at a pub in Camden in north London, but I had arrived early and so I decided to wait at the bar and feign an interest in the football match that was being shown on a large TV screen attached to a post in the centre of the room. While I was waiting I could not help but notice the entrance of an individual who, like me had arrived at the pub unaccompanied. Camden was noted as a popular destination for those with alternative tastes and was frequented by musicians and music fans as well as being a destination for young people who wished to go out drinking, a traditional English pastime that provided a public space for the practice of English sociability, helpfully mediated by alcohol, that was often attributed a quality of helping people relax and 'open up'.

Camden was also the haunt of the kind of people I felt just wanted to cause trouble, those who, as the English phrase put it 'had a chip on their shoulder' and expressed a generally belligerent attitude towards those around them. This individual appeared to me as though he might be one of these people. His style of dress was distinctly 'alternative' and the intent, at least to me, seemed to be to explicitly stand out – he sported a black and white skull bandana, a white vest and combat trousers adorned with chains that were tucked into high Doc Marten boots. He moved with a swagger, with his

chest puffed out and his eyes swept the room as he passed through daring anyone present to stare back. They didn't and neither did I. He circled through the pub before leaving and part of me was relieved that he did. Shortly after Kev arrived, I bought drinks for us and we settled down at a table to wait for Anna. Kev had just begun to tell me about his plan to go on a diet, when he lifted his hand and waved. I looked up expecting to see Anna, but Kev appeared to be waving to the swaggering individual I had hoped to avoid a short while earlier. He stomped over, shook Kev's hand aggressively, nodded at me when we were introduced, then marched off to the bar.

Kev explained that his name was Brad, that he was Anna's housemate and that he was a vocalist in a "really good" hardcore – a style of aggressive punk music - band. When he returned to the table he was carrying a large plastic jug containing Long Island Ice Tea that was designed to be shared among several drinkers. He placed it down at the table heavily, jabbed two straws into the top of it and drained it in around five minutes. Shortly after Anna arrived he went back to the bar and returned with another. Although he became friendlier as the evening progressed, his initial manner was quite stand-offish and he avoided participation in the humour shared round the table. He seemed to express particular disdain when we discussed anything about *World of Warcraft*, which as might be imagined we did with some frequency. Later it was decided that we would all go back to the house he and Anna lived in and having decided he wasn't quite as intimidating as he appeared I decided that would be an enjoyable thing to do.

On arrival at the small 'two-up two-down' Victorian terraced house they lived in I was genuinely surprised to see that he had decorated the entire lounge with *Star Wars* toys - including an enormous range of plastic lightsabers and a mantelpiece full of figurines of various shapes and sizes. One of the first things he stated in a tone that combined both threat and whimper, was that we could look at his *Star Wars* paraphernalia, but we could not touch it. At a later point Anna informed me that on one occasion she had invited friends back and they had played at lightsabre fighting in the street and that

he had become quite upset at the thought that they might have been damaged. Surprisingly Brad sent me a 'friend request' on Facebook the following day and having 'accepted' him I immediately set about scrolling through his profile and was surprised at the unusual combination of hardcore posturing and his thoughtful responses to episodes of the fantasy TV show *Game of Thrones*. One thing the wide network of friends did have in common was their level of commitment to the fantasy genre, but if I had only ever met them in public, this would not have been something I would have assumed even though *World of Warcraft* was a fantasy MMO.

Brad was in many ways, not typical of most of the people I met during my fieldwork, at least in terms of his slightly aggressive demeanour, but in many ways he embodied the same tensions – the need to conceal his 'geeky' side in public. There was a definite sense that, in public Brad had not just to hide 'geeky' knowledge, but make efforts to ensure that anybody he encountered did not suspect that it was even a possibility. Brad's bluff disposition, the air of cynicism he adopted in his reactions to our conversations about *World of Warcraft*, can be understood as the adoption of a conventionally masculine role, a muscular social confidence that would belie the possession of obscure knowledge about the fantasy genre. It was probably no coincidence that he chose to discuss the *Game of Thrones* TV series on the more public space of Facebook, although the show was unambiguously 'fantasy', its popularity was attributed to its 'adult' and sometime provocative themes – incest, sexual violence, deceit - that were considered 'relevant' to mainstream genres. By contrast Brad's Facebook page was never used to display his impressive collection of *Star Wars* toys.

8.3. Fantasy and the Collective Imagination

Throughout the study I have referred to the 'imagination', but as yet I have not examined this term in any detail; in this chapter it feels appropriate to make recompense. I want to begin by examining the contribution of anthropology to the analysis of the concept of fantasy, with a particular focus on Arjun Appadurai's explication of the term and how it relates to his notion of the imagination (1996).

Fantasy is a term that has a wide range of different meanings and applications in both academic and vernacular contexts. The fantasy of Freudian psychology, an inner domain of subjective pleasure associated with the subconscious and conditions such as neurosis (Laplanch and Pontalis 1968) differs from the way in which the term is used in anthropological studies, which is different to the more common-place notion of a sexual fantasy (Kahr 2007), the fantasy football team or the 'fantasy home', which in turn is different to the genre of fantasy present in the form of books, films and videogames. While the focus in this study is the latter, I want to begin by looking at the way the term has been used more generally in anthropology and the relationship it has with the notion of the 'imagination'. The specific statement I wish to begin with is Appadurai's claim that:

> "the idea of fantasy carries with it the inescapable connotation of thought divorced from projects and actions, and it also has a private, even individualistic sound about it. The imagination, on the other hand, has a projective sound about it… Fantasy can dissipate (because its logic is so often autotelic), but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action… The imagination is today the staging ground for action, and not only for escape." (1996: 7).

While there is a wider set of issues around the concept of the imagination (e.g. Strauss 2006, Sneath et al 2009), there is something to be said for Appadurai's distinction. it certainly chimes with common-sense ideas concerning the intimate and internalised renderings often credited to fantasy and the distinction between the subjective and the collective provides a different perspective to the more conventional 'reality-fantasy' dichotomy. As I stated at the beginning of the chapter, it also appeared to be largely the case during my fieldwork in as much as engagement with fantasy genre media tended to take place at a much more individual and private level rather than in collective, public activities and the spaces in which these occurred.

In recent decades the discussion of fantasy has become far more prevalent in anthropological debate, particularly in relation to the idea of the 'imagination' or the 'imaginary'. Two works, Benedict

Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Cornelius Castoriadis' *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987), have had a profound influence on the adoption of this term in anthropological literature, not least its use by Appadurai (1990, 1996). While the aim of these studies was to move away from what were understood to be the essentialisms of Marxist materialism, in the case of Castoriadis, or the essentialisms of nationhood, in the case of Anderson, in both cases the breakthrough was to present the imagination as no longer a strictly subjective, internal process but a collective endeavour that manifested as a real state of affairs. The emphasis on the collective nature of the imagination no doubt enabled anthropologists to consider it a legitimate concept for the discipline and one that was seen to be expanding in line with other forces such as globalisation, modernity and especially forms of mass media (Anderson 1983, Appadurai 1996).

Here it's worth focusing on Appadurai's ideas elucidated in *Modernity at Large* (1996) as it is in this work that he sets out what he sees as the expanded role of the imagination in everyday life. The broader scope of his argument concerns the nation state and what he sees as its invariable collapse, but tied to this is his view that the imagination is now a fundamental feature of what he describes as 'modern subjectivity'. He identifies processes of migration and electronic media as the twin forces responsible for this shift because "they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds" (1996: 3) under greater conditions of uncertainty that prevail in a globalised world. The imagination, under these conditions, comes to the fore because traditions and everyday routines have been disrupted and there is therefore a greater need to improvise and invent and it is the material of the mass media that is often employed in this manner. As such what were once "residual practices, confined to special persons or domains, restricted to special moments or places" (ibid: 53), such as the rituals and rites so familiar to readers of anthropological accounts of the 20th century (e.g. Turner 1969, Geertz 1980), are now accessible for use at a more quotidian level.

He does not explicitly broach the term enchantment in the framework of his study, but we might assume that it is to some degree implicit in the imaginative practices he envisions. As far as the gamers

in my study were concerned, employment of the imagination was a quotidian practice, albeit for somewhat different historical reasons to those he gives for the post-colonial settings on which he focuses. However, what is missing from his account, alongside detailed ethnographic accounts, is any consideration of the tensions that might emerge between prescribed roles for the imagination, the presence of the materials with which to imagine and the realisation of collective projects of action.

This is an issue taken up in Brad Weiss's paper on 'thug realism' in Arusha, Tanzania (2002). Weiss's piece is specifically concerned with Appaduarai's claims concerning the consequences and limitations of the imagination. Weiss makes the point that there is a tendency in anthropological studies that centre on the imagination to assume that shared materials make shared worlds, leading him to pose the question: "Is fantasy an assertion about universal entitlement to access a worldwide order of signs and values in a deterritorialized ecumene…?" (2002: 94). He argues that although the young men in Arusha surrounded themselves with the images of American 'gangsta' rappers and other global imagery and that this constituted a detailed discourse in their lives, that the potency of these fantasies was derived precisely from the absence of the young men themselves. Although the mass media presented worlds of possibilities and expressive materials, the conditions of poverty and the lack of opportunity, amongst other local forces, limited the degree to which these possibilities could be realised. For example, few men sported the completely bald hairstyles or dreadlocks of the US African American celebrities whose images adorned walls and windows in barber shops, because the young men felt obliged to adhere to the traditions of the area and could find themselves threatened by the local authorities if they were to adopt these kinds of hairstyles. Weiss's study provides an example where flows of mass-media images were used collectively and expressively but were not realised in the forms of projects of action. Instead the possibilities these images and narratives presented brought into focus the limitations of the young men's actual predicaments.

Another relevant example is Cara Wallis's notion of "mobile transcendence" amongst female migrant workers in Beijing (2012). Wallis develops this term to describe the way that many of her informants

possessed photographs of nature or friends and family on their mobile phones that enabled them to overcome the sense of alienation they experienced living as migrants in the city with few privileges and in conditions of great uncertainty. Through these photographs of nature and beauty these women were able to transcend the immediacy of their circumstances, "to transport themselves 'to another place'" (ibid: 126). While this illustrates a clear example of how images could be used as resources to fuel the imagination and generate fantasy, this imaginative act was not collective nor were the images appropriated from mass media, they were instead very personal images taken by the owners of the mobile phones themselves. These moments of transcendence and escape might not qualify as projects of action – they did not substantially alter the circumstances of the women in question - but they did nonetheless have a transformational effect on their lives.

In these examples, there was little that could be identified as intrinsically collective about the imagination, nor was it necessarily possible to employ the imagination to produce change. In each case, various factors mitigated against and constrained the possibilities the imagination presented. As Sneath et al note, descriptions of the imagination in anthropology often betray romantic intents in which they are construed in exclusively positive terms (2009) or, as for Appadurai, in denuding it of its specific cultural contexts.

Ethnographically speaking then, the question is: what kinds of conditions created the opportunity for collective uses of the imagination and what kinds of conditions prevent or constrained this possibility? One of the most conspicuous aspects of *World of Warcraft* was its fantasy setting – in this 'high' fantasy setting dragons, magic and extra-dimensional entities, rendered in bold design and bright colours, were presented as everyday experiences and these genre trappings had unquestionable appeal to those who played, but this fantasy setting was rarely the focus or subject of the guild's activities neither was it a topic that came up spontaneously during conversations within or external to the game. Collective practices, as the previous chapters have demonstrated, were most often oriented around engagement with knowledge produced about the game's coded architecture and the

performance of this knowledge. Those who committed to a performative engagement with the fantasy setting in the form of 'roleplaying' were viewed as subverting its authentic purpose. The fantasy genre, often considered a correlative if not causative adjunct to the imagination, proved less amenable to these kinds of imaginative practices than a finite system of knowledge and its performance. Given the integral relationship between architecture and modes of action one might justifiably ask: did the fantasy aspect of *World of Warcraft* matter at all? While the short answer is, yes, it did, its significance, as with the fantasy genre as a whole was more often than not downplayed or concealed.

8.4. Everyday Enchantment

Virtually everybody I got to know during my fieldwork eventually revealed to me that they considered themselves a fan of the fantasy genre even if they usually concealed this information from me to begin with. Once they were willing to discuss their interest in the genre with me the reason they supplied was, broadly: enchantment.

I was initially hesitant about using this term because of the way Weber employed the term in relation to the emergence of rational and bureaucratic systems that he saw as central to the project of modernity and which displaced and marginalised the mystical aspects of life, leading to a general state of disenchantment (1963). There were few occasions during fieldwork when it felt as though people's lives were locked into the 'iron cage' of rationality – the simple dualism of rational and enchanted just did not bear out in practice. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the social lives of most people were characterised by the indeterminate status of broad and expansive social networks. Engaged and committed as they were to the fantasy genre, enchantment was actually a more regular and quotidian experience than the rational. While this fact in itself motivated the arguments presented in this chapter it became evident that what people considered a good fantasy experience shared with Weber's definition of enchantment the theme of mystification, here referring to the sense of the unknown or experiences that were other than transparent.

What sealed my decision to hold to this term was that the ways in which people discussed the qualities of the genre that appealed to them the most were remarkably similar to the way Alfred Gell used the term 'enchantment' in his anthropological account of art (1994). In viewing art as a technology he moved beyond aesthetics by arguing that art is made through and achieves a certain technical level of excellence, and part of the enchanting quality of art is that these technical processes are somewhat obscure, that the viewer is confounded by the technical manufacture of such things. There was then something mystifying about the experience desired from fantasy, and this often stemmed from the technical construction of the fantasy media object, whether the results were seen as awe-inspiring, beautiful or prescient. What became apparent about this experience of enchantment was that it might require effort on the part of the individual to appreciate or realise. What was also interesting was the sheer range of ways in which enchantment could be experienced, something that accords with what Allison found for Japanese and North American children in her study of Japanese toys such as Pokémon and Power Rangers (2006).

There was a general agreement amongst my informants that the fantasy genre provided a greater possibility for enchanting experiences than other genres and was much better suited to producing the unexpected or the unusual. Bushe, for example explained to me that "you get more freedom to throw in something that's a bit obscure". This was by far the most widely discussed issue when the subject matter of fantasy media, such as books, films or graphic novels arose and the grounds on which it would be judged. For example during a conversation with Ted and his friend Carl, Carl explained that this was precisely the reason that they enjoyed the *Song of Fire and Ice* series of books by George R.R. Martin, better known as its TV adaptation, *Game of Thrones*. One of the appealing aspects of this series for them, they pointed out, was the author's habit of killing off important characters. Tim explained in further detail referring to an interview he had seen on the internet with the author:

"It's because he said that in every other fantasy book you always have the hero and you

know no matter what they're put up against they'll get through it, so Luke's facing up against

a hundred Stormtroopers, you know that something's going to intervene or he'll find a

power or… there's no real danger and what he said right from the off was that 'I wanted my

readers to really invest in the characters. If you're scared, if your favourite characters all of

the time and you just have no idea whether or not they're going to die, then you feel for

them'"

Interestingly, by way of contrast he identified *Star Wars*, a series in which the survival of the main

heroes was seen to be guaranteed and was one of the fantasy films whose success had become a

blueprint for other fantasy stories and therefore rather generic to the genre. The unpredictability of

Game of Thrones was also seen as the reason for its commercial success with a mainstream TV

audience. Carl suggested that "I think that's why *Game of Thrones* has hooked so many people because

it's unpredictable and there's so many overarching plots going on and you just don't know where it's

going". Enchantment through fantasy was then an example of how people engaged with uncertainty

and we can see why role-playing games like *Dungeon Crawl Classics* discussed at the beginning of

Chapter 2 favoured the genre.

The capacity of fantasy was seen to be able to achieve this experience in numerous different ways.

Another common form was 'alterity' - things and experiences that were aesthetically different from

the norm. This could be experienced as beauty, a quality attributed to many of the landscapes and

'zones' in *World of Warcraft* that were seen to embody conventional aesthetic criteria in a hyper-

realised sense. For example, guild member Alice explained how she would spend her time playing

World of Warcraft long after the other guild members had logged out of the game in a zone called

Nagrand that was a lush, green rural idyll characterised by floating tree-topped outcrops and dramatic

waterfalls – "it was beautiful" she explained to me "it was the look and the feel, and then when you

turn around and you have this regular world and you're like 'ah shit, boring'". Another way in which

this form of alterity was experienced was from the wholly alien, rendered as everyday that generated a sense of immersion. This was seen as a particularly difficult achievement in fantasy media. One common example was what was described as the 'cantina scene' in the first *Star Wars* film, where the bizarreness of the alien customers is naturalised through the mundane activities they engage in such as drinking, chatting and listening to music. Another example that was mentioned regularly was the film *Blade Runner*, which was rated very highly as a piece of successful fantasy media:

> "*Blade Runner* is a favourite of a lot of people because it doesn't explain itself it just dumps you in the story, it uses colloquial terms as opposed to really technical terminology and it drops you down in such a way that all the characters are so relaxed about the whole thing that you can sit there and have that 'click' – okay that's not real but for that couple of hours it was, everything that happened was real in the sense that it could be, the way they laid it out for you"

This relationship between the alterity of fantasy and the sensation of 'realism' was for many a central component of the experience and was a key technique for making appealing fantasy, a skill that not all, and in the opinion of some very few, producers of fantasy media could realise. Related to both these modes was the concept of exploration and adventure, that good fantasy was big in scale and included plenty of places to explore either in person in a videogame or through the exploits of characters in a film or book. Bushe described this to me with reference to what he specifically referred to as an 'obscure' children's TV show called *Aquila* "basically it was a couple of kids and they found this spacecraft in a cave underground and it was from some ancient civilization and I tell you what as a child when you watched it you wanted that because basically it was like a small aircraft that was air-powered and could turn invisible and go incredibly fast and it could just fly. It was like this molten blob and they went on all kinds of adventures". It was the possibility presented by the latter that most thrilled him about the show and it was also what he looked for in videogames.

A final example, perhaps most appropriately described as 'utopian', was that for some people good fantasy presented settings that were felt to be in some way better, more accurate or provide alternative and potentially better ways of life. In some cases, particularly for science fiction fantasies this was often seen as the intention of the author, such as the book *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson in which the term 'cyberspace' was first coined and which was seen by many as responsible for predicting a state of society possible in the near future. In other cases the society described was not necessarily supposed to represent a future state of the world yet appealed because of the way it was structured. This was particularly apparent for one of the female guild members who expressed a vehement dislike for the *Lord of the Rings* books, in part because she found Tolkien's prose dry, but also because of the poor representation of women in Middle Earth, which she compared unfavourably to other fantasy settings in which women had greater presence and often more equal status with men.

In Allison's study of Japanese toys, she suggests that the form toys and media properties like *Power Rangers* and *Pokémon* take is reflective and productive of the postmodern hybridisation of traditional Japanese beliefs in animism and the shifts in production and marketing that took place in Japan in the post-War decades emphasising flexibility, portability and transformation, all of which can be seen as responses to the social conditions the Japanese people experienced during this period and the sense of alienation that was the outcome of this (2006). While this may well have been the case in Japan, it was less obviously so for the people whose lives I became a part of in London. Anthropologists have argued that there is no simple, homogeneous form of modernity that constitutes a single monolithic experience against which people react (Miller 1994, 1995, Pels 2003) and the numerous modes of enchantment which fantasy was used for by the people in this study attest to the variety of desires and experiences with which they invested it. Certainly there were times when frustration with work or exhaustion through a long commute were occasions on which people turned to fantasy, but to a certain extent fantasy was taken for granted. At some level Appadurai's claim that fantasy was part of the quotidian was quite true here (1996); there was both an abundance of fantasy media available

and its presence and use was not considered exceptional, in fact it was deeply embedded in on the one hand long-term historical traditions and in a complimentary way more recent developments in 'children's culture'.

8.5. Childhood and the Tradition of Fantasy

In his study of collective discourses that emerged around fantastical fiction during the first half of the twentieth century, Saler notes that during the previous two centuries the imagination had been largely marginalised in response to Enlightenment modes of thought that stressed rational and universalistic thinking (2012). This general marginalisation should be connected with the attendant emergence of a distinct 'children's culture' with which the imagination was closely associated (Sutton-Smith 1986). The Victorian period has been closely entwined with the emergence of separate fantasy worlds for and featuring children in literature - Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, published in 1863, is held up as one of the earliest examples in this particular history and it was evident that this association remained problematic for those committed to the genre in the present day.

One evening in summer 2012, for example, I met Kev at a local pub and during the conversation we discussed the recently released superhero film *Avengers Assemble*, he told me he hadn't seen it but had heard that it was very good from others and expressed an interest in seeing it. As our conversation progressed he admitted to me, somewhat hesitatingly, that he enjoyed the cartoon series *Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* and it was only when I said that I had also watched and enjoyed the series that he visibly relaxed and began to talk about it more enthusiastically.

The cartoon in question was evidently targeted at a younger audience, but was tonally mature enough and, in the eyes of many fans, true to the source material to have attained something like a cult status with adult fans of the *Avengers* comics. Although I didn't ask him why he was initially anxious, I presumed it was the ambiguous status of the cartoon that concerned him. I knew that this wasn't the case with other, more widely accepted cartoons that were deemed to be appealing to both children

and adults, for example he publicly expressed his enjoyment for the humorous and irreverent fantasy cartoon *Adventure Time* because the status of its dual appeal was more secure.

Historical examples of the representation of what occurs when adults engage with the imagination, such as *Billy Liar* (Waterhouse 1959) and the North American book *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (Thurber 1939), generally present the individuals in question as unable to deal with the realities of their lives, a narrative that remains present in more recent publications that tell 'real-life' stories of individuals who participated in fantasy roleplaying games in their adolescence such as *The Elfish Gene* (Barrowcliffe 2007) and *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks* (Gilsdorf 2009).

There is no doubt that apprehensions about the legitimacy of fantasy contributed to a common reticence to discuss examples of the genre in public. However an argument can be made that the close tie between childhood and fantasy determined its status in the private domains of individuals more fundamentally with respect to play and toys. Two separate books on the history of toys in 20th century North America - Kline's *Out of the Garden* (1993) and Cross's *Kid's Stuff* (1997) are concerned with the ways in which the commercial toy industry and its marketing in the form of advertising, TV shows and films has influenced the imagination of children and in the course of their arguments they identify a trend in the growth of fantasy toys through the final quarter of the 20th century.

They argue that prior to this period children's toys tended to be versions of the kinds of things relevant to their parents – such as toys that represented domestic activities or conventionally masculine forms of work or pursuits (train sets, Meccano, fishing etc.) whereas from the late 1970s toys increasingly represented a fantasy world separated from the world of adults that produced a distinct 'children's culture'. Although it's difficult to assess the degree to which this is relevant to the people in my study, it is the case that all of them were born during the period discussed by Kline and Cross, and they grew up with *Star Wars* and the other North American imported fantasy properties such as *He-man and The*

Masters of the Universe, *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles*, *Thundercats* and so on, alongside the tradition of UK and European produced fantasy TV shows aimed at children. Regardless of their opinions of these fantasy media (some were more enthusiastic than others), there was an everyday familiarity with these kinds of fantasy worlds and settings and everyone with whom I spoke had developed an interest in fantasy during their childhood part of which involved play with the toys many of these properties were created to market.

Play, then, was a constitutive part of people's early experiences of the fantasy genre. In academic accounts a close relationship is often asserted between the terms 'play' and 'games', no doubt due in part to the English language use of the verb 'play' to describe participation in games. Malaby makes the case that values attributed to games such as 'fun' and the status of being consequence-free are better credited to 'play' (2007), for example, an understanding that hews closely to Caillois's definition of *paidia* – open-ended, rule-free and spontaneous forms of play.

As Sutton-Smith has eloquently argued, the term and concept of play has been deployed with great flexibility in both the social and natural sciences (1997) and its value, at least as an academic construct, appears to lie in the rhetorical force it lends to the frame of an argument. From an ethnographic perspective, however, the term play was considerably more circumscribed and differentiated in its uses. The verb form of 'play' was used consistently to describe engagement with videogames, board games and roleplaying games – people 'played *World of Warcraft*' – but was fundamentally altered when the preposition 'with' was added. Playing with some 'thing' was used to describe engagement with objects or people, usually toys or other individuals and was almost exclusively associated with the activities of children. Most people's accounts of their childhood experiences of the fantasy genre included 'playing with' commercial toys such as *Transformers*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or *Pokémon*.

Notably, those who collected what would otherwise be described as 'toys' in their adulthood – often referred to by other terms such as 'action figures' or 'collectibles' – spent time ensuring that these objects were not intended for 'play'. In several cases these items were enclosed behind glass cases where they could not be handled at all (see fig 7), or were 'for display' only as poor Brad insisted in regards to his 'lightsabers' in the story I recounted at the beginning of the chapter. That Brad's rules were broken on one occasion resulting in Anna's friends playing *with* his lightsabers in the street, was almost exclusively down to the fact that those doing so were according to Anna 'very drunk', a physical state in English culture where adults felt able to do things they would otherwise avoid out of anxiety about how their actions would be perceived by others. If childhood play was mediated, at least in part, by toys based on commercial fantasy then there is a valid argument that it constituted part of a formative engagement with the genre.

This is significant not just because toys in some sense came to be seen as the stuff of childhood fantasy play, but that, as Sutton-Smith argues, "one of the major implicit cultural functions of toys in the past 200 years has been as props to support relatively solitary play" (1997: 155). In being given the material form of toys the fantasy genre then was incorporated into a pre-existing genre of activity that was in part intended to develop and habituate children with forms of "personal 'imaginary' skill" (ibid). Although these toys and the franchises they articulated were designed to negate everyday realism, unlike the toys of previous generations, they are better understood as part of the fabric of the lives of my informants - their *habitus* - inculcated through familiarity and routine. Correlations between childhood play and fantasy may have been cause for anxiety and embarrassment, but could also perform as a positive resource through which individuals could produce effective engagements with enchantment. For example, noting the connection between the imagination and childhood Bushe explained that:

"I think so especially when you're young – you have folk tales and Father Christmas and things like that I think you associate fiction books, and fantasy in particular with new experiences and when things are fresh and new to you it's a sense of adventure that I think other forms of fiction maybe don't capture that spirit quite as closely. I think a childlike imagination definitely helps when you're enjoying fantasy and I think that depends of the sorts of things you were exposed to when you were growing up."

Childhood in this account is represented not as an exclusive domain for fantasy, but a means through which the genre could be experienced, requiring a 'child-like' perspective. The fantasy genre then was a cultural resource (Hanks 1987) on which people could call to create moments of enchantment, not necessarily as a response to alienating aspects of modern life, but as a means to express and articulate social relations and one's status in the world. Fantasy was identified by its negative connotations with childhood and its separateness from the responsibilities and 'realities' of being an adult - an issue that was also seen as evident in assessments of quality. The sheer volume of fantasy media available encouraged the belief, no doubt correct, was that there was a terrific volume of generic, predictable and uninspiring examples of the genre out there, one person described them as typified by "olde worlde elves and giant spiders and swords". However, this baseline depreciation of the genre's output enabled people to express their appreciation and distinction principally through statements to the effect that these were precisely *not* the kinds of fantasy media they consumed.

Figure 7: an example of 'collectibles' in glass display cases

The acceptance of fantasy properties at this wider level was often predicated on some quality of the fantasy genre that was otherwise framed negatively. For example the accepted status of the *Song of Fire and Ice* series of books and the *Game of Thrones* TV adaptation was often grounded in the way they presented a more 'realistic' portrayal of the brutality of warfare and life in a pseudo-Middle Ages setting as opposed to the more romantic portrayals associated with 'Tolkien rip-offs'. Similarly the recent Batman films directed by Christopher Nolan were typically described as 'gritty realism' which was largely seen as much more credible than both the 'campy' portrayal of the 1960s TV show and the mid-90s films and which gave a comic book hero broader appeal to the extent that one guild member described it as "a crime drama trilogy that just happens to have a cop dressed as a bat in it". Some fantasy properties on the other hand were simply seen as 'classics' – such as *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* and *Star Trek* – that had acquired a timeless and incipient status, had mass appeal and therefore transcended qualities that might otherwise detract from their credibility. To be clear, this did not insulate them from criticism, the capacity to be critical was an important part of demonstrating knowledge of and across genres, but it did mean that they were acceptable subject matter for public

discourse in the first place, simply because they were familiar enough to a significantly large number of people to make coherent discourse possible. But this was simply not the case for the vast majority of fantasy properties and titles in people's collections. The majority were simply widely unknown and therefore of uncertain credibility in the context of those domains considered public.

I draw attention to this firstly in order to provide a different perspective to that expressed by Appadurai, for whom the place of the imagination in the everyday was as a consequence of rupture and the uncertainty of the loss of traditions (1996). To bring the argument back to an understanding of Englishness, fantasy was not a novel resource for the imagination, indeed from an anthropological perspective that focuses on the contingent and processual it was a venerable tradition of childhood. While scholarly works have identified the emergence of modern enchantment through technologies that enable experiences that provided "antidotes to the finitude of social experience" (Appadurai 1996: 53), my understanding was that enchantment in English culture was never entirely supressed but was simply marginalised and appropriated into the private domain where it could be practiced without public censure.

It was evident that media of enchantment had been passed through generations of children principally in the form of stories and books and then late in the twentieth century toys, TV shows, films and videogames, a purpose of which was to inculcate the production of solitary fantasy-based play. In this way we might understand the experience of fantasy as a quotidian means through which a solitary and internalised form of privacy was defined and childhood play as providing the cultural tools with which this could be achieved in adulthood. This could range from the ultimately unrealised 'day dreams' described for the protagonist in the book *Billy Liar* (Waterhouse 1959) to the sometimes disturbing sexual fantasies Brett Kahr describes in *Sex and the Psyche* (2007). What should not be discounted in this discussion is that the normative practice of private and often internal engagement with fantasy allowed for the potential for the 'phantasmagoric' (Sutton-Smith 1997). The internal

space represented in the individual act of imagining is perhaps *the* most private of all domains where conventional social norms were least effective.

If any point of rupture might be alluded to it is the situation in which my informants found themselves as the first generation of adults whose childhoods were in some sense characterised by an exclusive culture of fantasy alien to that of their parents, as argued by Kline (1993) and Cross (1997), and who, as adults had to come to terms with on the one hand fantasy as a resource for the articulation of private engagements with enchantment and on the other hand the increasingly public presence of fantasy that was inclusive of adults and occasionally exclusive of children, which is no doubt a result of the childhood experiences of the producers of these works.

What I contend in this necessarily brief foray into the history of the fantasy genre is that enchantment was in the first instance commonplace, and constituted a major part of a childhood practice and the educational system that supported it. A great deal of the frustration with the genre seemed to arise from individuals' dissatisfaction with the levels of enchantment it was capable of achieving, because in some sense it was predictable and therefore 'boring'. Demonstrative of the quotidian nature of enchantment was the degree to which people were highly selective about what kind of enchantment they wanted to experience. At the same time, contra Appadurai, there is a valid claim that fantasy was not necessarily inherently 'internalised' and 'autotelic' (1996). What I hope to have demonstrated thus far is that the internalisation of fantasy for the people in my study was bound up with the history of childhood practices, the commercial deployment of the fantasy genre targeted at children in the US and the duality of English culture. This in no way implies a simple determinative relationship between these forces and the practices of London gamers, but they evidently shaped and influenced how the genre was conceived and engaged with. It was also clear that the shifting form of the genre, its attempts to develop more 'mature' themes and expressions was seen as enabling more public discourses to emerge, even if they remained in tension with pre-existing forms and associations. Yet, problems with the articulation of the genre in public domains was not simply a consequence of

historical forces through which the genre was deployed, but the particular form the genre took and the kinds of 'imaginings' this made possible. The subject will be explored in the next section through the examination of the evolution of the fantasy genre itself.

8.6. The Rise of the Fantasy Genre

As with all genres, those based on media properties or otherwise, origins are notoriously difficult to pin down and as the theorist of genre, Todorov argued, genres are historical and are as such in constant transformation (1990). In *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012) James and Mendlesohn place the earliest stories in the ancient world but in their book *A Short History of Fantasy* (Mendlesohn and James 2012) they begin their account in the late 19th century. What is clear, however, is that from the 1960s onwards the sheer volume of published media relating to the fantasy genre markedly increased. While fantasy and the related genres of science fiction and horror had gained popularity in the late 19th century, the publication in North America of cheap paperback versions of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books had a huge impact on the genre. The opening pages of *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012) mentioned above lists the books discussed by authors in the volume in chronological order, counting only the first book in the case of trilogies or series. The first is Beowulf attributed to some point around 800 AD, but between the date 1900 and 2010 (the latest date of publications) over 240 books are listed, of these 155 were published between 1970 and 2010. As far as I'm aware there are no figures for the number of books of the fantasy genre that have *ever* been published, needless to say those present in this list are just a tiny fraction of the total. No doubt a comprehensive list of all the fantasy media published since 1970 would be virtually impossible to compile.

Mendlesohn and James describe Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books as 'quest fantasy' (2012), a fairly self-explanatory term, but they also note that "previous quest fantasies tended to be episodic, or, if they contained a goal it rarely had great import. Tolkien married the adventure fantasy with epic: suddenly, the journey on which the participants embarked had world-shattering consequences"

(2012: 48). The 'multi-volume' sequence of the books that encompassed this variation of the theme

of the more enclosed quests evident in the works of authors such as Robert E. Howard, best known

for his creation Conan the Barbarian, had by the end of the 1970s become a genre norm – what

Mendelsohn and James describe as the 'multi-volume quest fantasy' (2012: 109). Tolkien's other

innovation was the introduction of a heretofore unseen degree of mimesis in the genre – "the sheer

consistency of the world was a first: there is a sense of a pre-history, there is a map (setting a

precedent for all subsequent quest fantasies), there are poems in Elvish" (ibid: 47). In the wake of the

renewed popularity of the *Lord of the Rings*, publishers were quick to republish existing works of

fantasy that shared similarities with Tolkien's work or could at least be marketed as such, but it was

authors who produced works subsequent to this who defined the 'multi-volume quest fantasy'. By the

time I had begun my fieldwork in 2011 this meant that there were countless series containing their

own worlds, with their own pre-histories, maps, poems and world-changing events. This twist on the

genre was not restricted to books but also emerged in other media such as film, TV, graphic novels

and comics and videogames and roleplaying games.

As far as my informants were concerned the abundance of the fantasy genre manifested itself through

the sheer variety of material they owned or had read, played or watched (fig. 8). Significantly, in many

cases each individual owned a very different selection of fantasy media titles and series. Sometimes

these differences might be in format, for example one of my informants owned a huge range of

graphic novels and film and TV show DVDs but very few books, another owned primarily books and

only a small number of graphic novels. In most cases however it was the specific titles that differed.

What became apparent in conversation was that each individual had become interested in the genre

through different titles and formats. For example one of the guild members, who was quite a bit

younger than the others became interested in fantasy through *Pokémon* when he was very young,

which he described as his generation's 'Muffin the Mule', and then became interested in comics when

he read a Japanese manga graphic novel called *Death Note*, which he bought in a local WHSmith shop.

He didn't really read fantasy books, preferring comics and films and explained to me that he hadn't

read *Lord of the Rings* because he found it "boring and badly written". He was not alone in his low

opinion of *Lord of the Rings*, one of the female guild members also described it as badly written, and

also as representing women poorly. Another member had read fantasy fairy tale books when she was

younger but cited Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (1995) as the book she most associated with her

introduction to the genre. For another it was not so much books but the TV shows he watched as a

child that got him in to the genre. Another began with Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* books for whom

they had remained a firm favourite and yet another began by reading *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks he

borrowed from his local public library from which he was inspired to draw his own creations. And

several people mentioned the US television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Figure 8: example of a pile of fantasy books

There were of course plenty of examples of fantasy titles that appeared regularly in people's

collections: the *Songs of Fire and Ice* books by George R.R. Martin, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*,

Warhammer 40,000 novels and *Batman* graphic novels were some of the examples that appeared

recurrently in people's collections, but these tended to be vastly outnumbered by those that were specific to the individual. The effect of this was that many of the fantasy media people enjoyed were rarely the subject of conversation or any form of mutual connection. Exploring the material forms fantasy took in the private spaces of people's homes, usually their bedrooms, revealed plenty of surprises, much like the lightsabre-adorned lounge described in the chapter's opening. In fact what I noticed when I initiated discussions of fantasy was a tendency for people to be decidedly reluctant about going into detail as they seemed to be anxious about what I would think of their choices and were concerned that their interests might be deemed too 'geeky'.

One of the principal reasons people struggled to socialise fantasy was because as a genre it encouraged forms of 'geekiness'. Building on the definition of 'geeking out' as defined by Horst *et al* as a form of "intense commitment or engagement with media or technology, often one particular media property, or a genre or type of technology" (2010: 65), here I want to refine it slightly by adding that intensity alone was not the definitive criteria for 'geeking out', the subject matter of interest was just as significant. For example an individual could express a great deal of knowledge and interest in sport, especially football, without any sense of embarrassment or awkwardness and in a group context would expect to find commonality with at least some others present. Occasionally those who did not share an interest in football would state their bewilderment at the excitement football generated and would share their feelings with me in private, but they would never take it upon themselves to do so during these discussions or suggest that those involved were 'geeks'. Quite the opposite was true when fantasy examples were brought up in conversation in similar group contexts.

One occasion I distinctly remember, principally for the sense of embarrassment those involved must have felt, was during a barbecue at a guild meet-up in London. I was sat with a group of twelve people on deckchairs in a garden in south London and in these kinds of situations there would usually be several conversations taking place between smaller numbers of people. Michael and another guild

member Stuart had struck up a conversation about the current run of comics published by Marvel (creators of superheroes including Spider-man, Iron Man and the Hulk), but because they were sat several seats away from each other they were forced to raise their voices to be heard. As they were doing so, by coincidence the other conversations simultaneously stopped and attention briefly turned to Michael and Stuart's conversation which had moved into a detailed account of the changes that had taken place in the comic book universe they were discussing. It was quite evident from the awkward silence that followed that their unintended audience had no idea what they were talking about and their conversation just sort of petered out, leaving a gap in the flow of conversation that took several uncomfortable minutes to re-ignite and the social flow to return.

There seemed to be an assumption that if the topic of football was brought up, at least some of the people present, especially if they were men, would have something to contribute and some understanding of the subject matter in the same way that the weather was considered an almost universal topic for 'banter' amongst the English (Miller 2016). Fantasy on the other hand was viewed as obscure and arcane knowledge. As information it was typically highly specialist, opaque and difficult to relate to. The modification I would add to Horst's definition of 'geeking out' is that the subject matter was deemed normatively 'obscure'. Importantly for my argument, displays of 'geekiness' were always socially risky. An individual's status may not be seriously jeopardised, but the potential for public performances that could be construed as 'geeky' were cause for social anxiety that was in itself of great concern in English culture.

Geekiness was not just about intensity of engagement but also described the possession of 'obscure' knowledge about some subject matter. The consequence of the breadth of works published and the depth of realism that went in to the production of the fantasy worlds presented in them was that the genre made it very difficult for individuals *not* to possess 'obscure' knowledge and therefore made a certain level of geekiness almost unavoidable. The fantasy genre then exhibited a tendency for

semiotic contingency, its broader meaningfulness and intelligibility was conceived as in some way dubious. In this sense it often appeared that the best way to avoid appearing too 'geeky' was not to bring up a subject that related to the genre at all.

On one summer evening I was accompanying Michelle to meet her boyfriend who was a chef at a pub in an affluent part of west London. Michelle was one of the more extroverted personalities I came to know and, not unlike Simon was comfortable sharing information most people would have felt to be too intimate. On one occasion she went into somewhat explicit detail about her sexual relationship with another guild member she had met during a guild meet-up. Michelle was a staunch defender of videogame culture as a legitimate and beneficial activity and had in the past told me that she had added 'raiding' to a job application form as an example of a skill that demonstrated her teamwork and goal-oriented achievements. During our walk we somehow got onto the subject of 'virtual worlds' as a phenomenon and she expressed her dislike of *Second Life* explaining that she had expected the graphics to be of a much higher quality. To contrast what she saw as these lacklustre graphics she mentioned a book called *Otherland* of which a principal element was a highly realistic and immersive virtual world. When I mentioned that I had read the book (and the other three books in the series) she stopped on the pavement and stared at me, jaw agape - "Oh my God" she exclaimed "I can't believe I've met somebody else who has actually read them, I've been dying to talk about them!" For the remainder of the journey she shared her thoughts on the story, often referring to elements I had long forgotten (the shortest book was over 650 pages and the longest was over 1300 meaning that there was a great deal of story to discuss and I had read them five years prior to this event). She had formed all these opinions internally and come to conclusions through debates 'in her head' and it felt as though I'd removed the lid from a bottle, such was the sense of release she exhibited. That Michelle would happily provide me with the details of her intimate physical moments over a cup of tea, but felt much less comfortable discussing the details of a fantasy book series she enjoyed was telling and says

something profound about the limitations the fantasy genre placed on the collective possibilities for the imagination.

8.7. 'The Unreachable Frontier'

As described earlier in the chapter, Tolkien's Middle Earth setting and *The Lord of the Rings* series effectively set the blueprint for the form fantasy fiction took in the 1970s and this largely remains the case today. Earlier and alternative expressions of the fantasy genre that had been more 'whimsical' or more directly inspired by the 'fairy tales' from which they were influenced had lacked these rigorous attempts to create coherent 'secondary worlds'. Although it wasn't until the late 1970s that this became the norm for the genre Saler has argued that this was already a phenomenon in some fictional literature by the end of the 19th century and may be regarded as a trend that persisted into the 20th century (2012). He suggests that in Europe and North America by the end of the 19th century an increased legitimacy was attributed to the imagination, particularly that associated with fiction and the worlds in which fictions were set. He suggests that this reflected a broader cultural project "that of re-enchanting an allegedly disenchanted world" (ibid: 6). Yet the associations of 'enchantment' with "the cognitive outlooks of groups traditionally seen as inferior by Western elites: "primitives", children, women, and the lower classes" (ibid: 9) meant that this new project of enchantment took a distinctly modern form, what he terms the 'ironic imagination' which he describes as a "self-conscious strategy embracing illusions while acknowledging their artificial status" (ibid: 13). Instead of seeing enchantment and rationality as conflicting forces, they operated a complimentary dialectic: a central motif of the 'ironic imagination' was engagement with fantasy through the modes of rationality, rigorous logic and 'objective' details where reason and wonder were not at odds but provided a means for the one to comment on the other. Along with the creations of authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle and H.P. Lovecraft, Saler cites Tolkien as exemplary of the output of the ironic imagination. Saler also claims that the communities that formed around the pursuit of the intellectualisation of fantasy were forerunners to 'virtual fantasy worlds' such as *World of Warcraft*, a position I will return to towards

the end of the chapter, it is my intention here to examine the 'ironic imagination' in some depth however.

Saler's argument rests on a definition of modernity that assumes some kind of binary between rationality and enchantment, albeit characterised by a dialectical dynamic, yet as I noted above from my observations and experiences this would be a gross simplification of people's experiences, most of which could not be described in these terms exclusively. The descriptions of enchantment provided in the previous section were, as far as I could tell, largely free from 'reason' and 'logic', even if the secondary worlds experienced in the fantasy media they consumed were the product of reasoned thought by their creators. This is not to detract from the context of Saler's argument in which fantasy often is and was somewhat marginalised, but it does suggest that the picture he draws of fantasy becoming progressively more legitimate is somewhat simplistic. The fantasy literature of the period on which he focuses, the 1920s and 1930s, no doubt acquired its validity from the logic that informed the settings, characters and stories, yet it appears that in the long run this actually worked against the rational discourses that otherwise might have informed debate around the genre. On the one hand, as discussed previously, the volume of coherent fantasy settings available simply produced too much information for any one individual to assimilate, but just as significant a consequence of the volume of this literature was the effect the popularity of the serial format had on the experience of the genre, a trend that has accelerated in recent years.

A perfect example of this is the proliferation of works based around Tolkien's Middle Earth works. The first of these, *The Hobbit*, published in 1937 was a standalone book, apparently produced off the back of a wager Tolkien had with his colleague and fellow fantasy author at Oxford University, C.S. Lewis. The *Lord of the Rings* books published almost twenty years later were a continuation of the same story. Prior to this Tolkien had also begun work on *The Silmarillion* (eventually published in 1977) that set out the 'creation story' of Middle Earth and its peoples. The story does not end there however. In

the wake of the renewed popularity of his works in the late 60s, further books such as *Unfinished Tales* (1980), two volumes titled *The Book of Lost Tales* (1983, 1984) were published during the 1980s and in 2007 *The Children of Hurin* was posthumously published. Although these works weren't direct sequels they did continuously expand, and in some cases revise the history and scope of the Middle Earth setting. Of course this list refers only to the works authored by Tolkien himself. Even if we ignore the film adaptations from 2001 to 2003 as strictly no more than adaptations (although they did add new elements to the story), videogames have further expanded the story and its setting beyond Tolkien's personal remit including the MMO *Lord of the Rings Online* and its five expansions and the single player game *Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor*.

Another example that has enough cultural salience to be recognised by readers is the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series written by George R.R. Martin. At the time of writing there are five books in the series and two further titles were due to be published at some point in the near future. As popular as the series had become through its television adaptation *Game of Thrones,* for fans of the books much of the anticipation hung on not just what would happen next within the books but when (if ever) Martin would actually publish and finish the series. Meanwhile, the sixth series of the television series set to debut in April 2016 had overtaken the books in the story timeline and was set to produce its own version of the saga that would differ from that found in the as yet unpublished books. As these examples indicate, the 'obscure' nature of the genre was not just an effect of the stories and worlds of magic in which they were set, but characterised the physical form the genre took. There always remained the prospect for additions to a series, even if it temporarily appeared to be complete.

The *Star Wars* films once again provide an example of this. After the 'original' trilogy of films (released between 1977 and 1983) finished it was assumed that the series was 'complete' at least as far as films were concerned – the 'Expanded Universe' of books, graphic novels and videogames assured that the stories continued in other formats. But in the mid-1990s the creator of the series, George Lucas,

announced his intention to film three 'prequel' films that were set prior to the original trilogy. When

the final film in this series was released in 2005 it was assumed that it would mark the end the series,

as Lucas claimed, despite the persistence of rumours about further sequels to the original series of

films. Then following the sale of Lucasfilm, George Lucas's production company, to Disney in 2012 a

further three films that continued the series were announced, along with a number of films that

promised to flesh-out events from earlier periods in the series' timeline.

There is no doubt that this trend is a consequence of commercial imperatives to produce a greater

volume of output from a successful piece of intellectual property, fantasy media is after all also a

commodity at some point in its life (Appadurai 1986), but its effects were felt well beyond the

economic sphere. Of the anthropological works written about the imagination Vincent Crapanazo's

Imaginative Horizons (2004) is one of the more esoteric, a self-consciously styled 'literary-

philosophical' account, that feels at times as though its intention is to affect, experientially, for the

reader the core idea that illuminates his work (I purposefully avoid the term 'argument') – "frontiers

as horizons that extend from the insistent reality of the here and now into that optative space or time

– the space time – of the imaginary" (2004: 14). These frontiers, he suggests, "cannot be crossed…

they postulate a beyond that is, by its very nature, unreachable in fact and in representation" (ibid).

His "concern", he explains, is:

> "with the role of what lies beyond the horizon, with the possibilities it offers us, with the licit
>
> and illicit desires it triggers, the plays of power it suggests, the dread it can cause – the
>
> uncertainty, the sense of contingency, of chance – the exaltation, the thrill of the unknown, it
>
> can provoke" (ibid).

It is highly unlikely that Crapanzano was thinking about the commercially produced fantasy franchises

I discuss above, but I think it's reasonable to understand the fantasy genre through his concept of the

'unreachable frontier'. As we have seen, for many fantasy settings the story or stories and events that could take place were never complete, there always remained a 'beyond', a possibility, of the expansion of the setting. There is no doubt, as Crapanzano states, that it offered 'desires' and was a source of great excitement and anticipation. But as Sneath *et al* note, his account tends toward the romanticisation of the imagination (2009) - the open-endedness of the genre could also elicit frustration, boredom and disinterest, as fans waiting for the completion of George R.R. Martin's A *Song of Fire and Ice* series of books attested.

My concern however is with the way specific forms and materials of the imagination affect the possibility for collective action, in Appadurai's terms (1996). Hope features prominently in Crapanazo's work as it does in Nuijten's account of the land claims of *Ejidatarios* in Mexico (2003). In the latter, regardless of the seeming inevitability of failure, bureaucratic processes and the materials they constituted promised a certain kind of certainty and resolution – hope was defined by the 'truth' these documents were believed to embody. The power of "what lay beyond the horizon" of the present in this instance was founded upon the material forms that mediated the imagination. Although the communities that formed around these hopes were not without problem, their formation tended to be galvanised by the existence, purported or otherwise, of these kinds of official documents. As Nuijten explains:

> "*ejidatarios* and bureaucrats are implicated in the construction of the idea of the state through processes of rationalisation, speculation and the construction of fantasies, but also through the process of fetishisation, that is the attribution of special powers to objects such as maps and documents" (2003: 198)

The claim I wish to make is that the incompleteness and scope of many fantasy settings and the sheer scope of the genre as a whole operated against the realisation of collective agency.

While the 'logic' of contemporary fantasy settings ostensibly provided material for public discourse, in the first instance it required a great deal of commitment to the material to do so with any confidence and secondly such knowledge was subject to changes that would invariably occur to the setting by the creators. Knowledge based on the genre's settings then was constantly shifting and was analogous to the form of 'knowing' described in the previous chapter. To engage with this kind of knowledge was to flirt with 'geekiness' and was also to set one's self a Sisyphean task of remaining up to date with ever-expanding thresholds of knowledge.

The logic of these fantasy settings, we might venture to say the rules of what was and was not possible, provided the grounds for their endless expansion and in doing so often undermined the capacity for logical application. This was particularly true for the world of comic book super heroes. The secondary worlds these characters inhabited had long histories – the two largest publishers DC and Marvel stretched back to the 1930s and 1960s respectively and the stories of individual characters such as Batman and Spider-Man were almost as enduring. Invariably, telling the story of an individual on a monthly or more frequent basis over half a century required the creators to carry out sometimes quite drastic changes to the worlds they inhabited ranging from temporary 'death' to what were referred to as 'reboots', where a new version of the existing world was introduced and certain elements of continuity were removed.

The conversation about Marvel comics I referred to earlier between Michael and Stuart provides a suitable example of this. At the time of their discussion the 'world', or 'universe' as it was referred to, of Marvel's superheroes had gone through a dramatic change. The Marvel universe consisted of the mainstream universe referred to as '616' and a seemingly infinite range of alternative versions of the same universe referred to by their specific numbers. One of these alternative universes had collided with the mainstream '616' universe effectively destroying both and in the wake of which a powerful

supervillain had taken the mantle of a god and reconstructed a world from the remaining parts of the former over which he ruled. Marvel had teased that this state of affairs would (naturally) come to an end when the heroes defeated the villain, but that the resulting return to the mainstream universe would be notably different to that which preceded it.

Note that this is a highly simplified account of the events that took place. Michael and Stuart's conversation considered the details of this storyline in great detail and when the unexpected silence fell around them they were in the process of discussing a new superhero who confusingly had taken the name of an existing superhero who had recently changed her name. Had I not been somewhat familiar with the subject matter under discussion, I have no doubt that I would have borne the same look of utter confusion on my face as everyone else who overheard their exchange. There was clearly a desire to use fantasy as a means to produce relationships and wider collectivities, the discovery of shared enjoyment of an otherwise obscure fantasy property or title was the ground for excitement and the possibility of forming more enduring and intimate relations.

Often fantasy material was actively used in order to solicit this kind of relationship. One of my informants showed me a pile of graphic novels she had been given by a friend for her birthday. In classic gift form, these items embodied something of the giver (Mauss 1990) by merit of containing knowledge and experiences that could be shared and as such were intended to further the relationship. I also noticed how certain individuals would be seen by others as experts on a certain fantasy property and others interested in finding out more about the property would come to them for advice and recommendations about what titles to purchase. Here again the sharing of an individual's knowledge through the material of fantasy was a means of creating relationships. But more often than not this knowledge was seen as being more likely to inhibit relationships than produce them.

8.8. The Public Place of Fantasy in *World of Warcraft*

In the previous chapters I have shown how the architecture of *World of Warcraft* was understood to be a finite and knowable system and that knowledge of the system was viewed as embodied in easily accessible and legible player resources. This was contrasted with the relative status of knowledge concerning people. However, people, mediated through *World of Warcraft* as players became knowable entities which enabled an expansive form of sociality that confirmed English values of public friendliness and allowed for collective forms of action. In this section I want to bring the discussion back to *World of Warcraft* and seek to explain why people chose not to realise collective forms of enchantment through the fantasy features of the game.

World of Warcraft was generally seen as one of the most successful and entertaining MMOs despite various drawbacks, as a fantasy property however it was seen as substantially less successful. While a minority displayed a more profound commitment to its fantasy setting, referred to as 'the lore', for the majority it had only limited appeal. Ted explained this to me in these terms: "Warcraft, as much as I love it, doesn't have those big ideas" which summed up the views of many others. While there was some affection for the setting, its narratives and its characters, principally through the familiarity hundreds of hours of engagement inevitably produced, this did not translate into credibility.

A significant part of the problem seemed to be that the setting was viewed as very generic, it utilised a wide-range of recognisable fantasy tropes but struggled to transcend them to form the kind of unexpected or surprising qualities that were viewed as the most exciting sources of enchantment. The construction of the world was seen to be somewhat haphazard, a re-combination of elements of other fantasy settings that never quite achieved its own identity, a *bricolage* in Levi-Strauss's terms (1970). A cause for concern was that the fantasy setting was secondary to the game and that as such it was less of a priority for Blizzard. With reference to the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion one guild member, Niall suggested that "they most likely made the story *after* they decided the expansion would be about pandas in pandaland". Another, Dave, was even more vocal about it:

"The story for the expansion was described as going back to the whole Allies vs Horde war and the Pandaren are meant to be there by fate to teach the other races to respect each other and shit. Basically it's shoehorned in as Blizzard love to do. But hey, at least it isn't 'space goats crashing a ship'! I was thoroughly disappointed in this, despite having a personal love for Chinese architecture so I find that fun to look at but it's very much *'Kung Fu Panda'* in *WoW*. Added to the horrendous amount of ideas from other games that they are implementing in a lot of areas pretty blatantly it feels extremely lazy game design on Blizzard's part. I think the main thing to enjoy is the novelty of it all."

What these players described is the genre norm for fantasy discussed in the previous section, but what they were particularly critical of was that, in their opinion, Blizzard did not always follow the 'logic' of the world they had created. The 'Pandaren' were seen by many as an 'inauthentic' part of the *World of* Warcraft fantasy world for various reasons, including the belief that the addition of this 'race' to the earlier *Warcraft* games was a 'joke' feature.

At various points debates about the relative legitimacy of Panderan came up in the run up to the expansion's release in 2012. Similar accusations had been levelled at the earlier expansion, *2007's The Burning Crusade* because it included a 'cosmic' element – what Dave referred to as 'space goats crashing a ship' – and was set in an alternative world that floated in the middle of space. At the time this was a radical departure from the (relatively) more grounded, naturalistic settings more typical of the 'medieval-esque' fantasy that characterised the initial release of the game. It may sound somewhat contradictory for players to argue that some fantasy settings were contrived and others were not when clearly all were fictional contrivances, but this I think demonstrates how powerful the influence of Tolkien's works remained even when people actively claimed to dislike the *Lord of the Rings* books.

Although this was never articulated to me, my sense was that one of the factors that relegated *World of Warcraft's* fantasy setting to its generic form was that, to some extent, Blizzard didn't take it all that seriously. As lead designer for *World of Warcraft*, Jeff Kaplan put it:

> "One of the things that *Warcraft* has going for it is that even though it's set in the fantasy genre, it's a very accessible intellectual property in so far as we don't take ourselves too seriously. We constantly pay homage to current events. We make a lot of pop culture references, which I think makes it a very inviting and safe universe for people who are not traditionally fantasy fans to get into."[8]

While the style of graphic design, which was less 'naturalistic' than most 'triple A' vidoegames, was explained as a way to make the game accessible to those whose computers did not have powerful graphics processors, it also utilised a distinct 'exaggerated' style that went beyond just simplicity. But more significantly, Blizzard peppered the game with 'jokes' and 'easter eggs' – content that referenced some other aspect of 'geek' or 'pop' culture. It also utilised somewhat clichéd fantasy tropes with no apology for doing so – the undead character race's zones, for example, looked like they had been borrowed from a Tim Burton film, the architecture design on the buildings in the zones around Icecrown Citadel in the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion looked very similar to the design of Mordor in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films.

The aesthetic and narratives exhibited a distinctly ersatz ethos that indicated that it was not striving to be highly original, one of the key elements that was seen to produce enchantment. The apparent absence of this kind of commitment to the genre as a 'serious' form meant that very few were willing to commit themselves to *World of Warcraft*'s 'lore'. Although there was a general familiarity with some of the key events, characters and narrative arcs, largely through the focus of expansion packs or

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[8] http://www.gameinformer.com/games/world_of_warcraft_cataclysm/b/pc/archive/2009/12/02/blizzard-s-jeff-kaplan-on-warcraft-s-past-and-future.aspx

the content of key raid dungeons, beyond this the lore tended to be seen as excessively complex and unnecessarily detailed, requiring time to absorb and understand to which few were willing to commit, a level of detail that was ultimately perceived to characterise the enthusiast in geeky terms.

For example part of the lore described the 'genesis' of the world involving extra-planar beings and cosmic forces, in a manner not dissimilar to Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. Many admitted that they actively avoided reading text in the game, such as that provided by 'quest-givers' – in game characters who alongside providing players with objectives would often include exposition that provided context and history about the setting. While such information-dense 'lore' was common to fantasy settings, the general belief that it was not taken seriously by the creators and perceived inconsistencies to the way the lore was developed mitigated against players' engagement with it.

One way in which players did experience enchantment, however, was through a sense of adventure. Importantly this experience was usually heightened when done so in solitude. This sense of immersion was one of the most oft-described experiences in *World of Warcraft*, often ascribed to people's initial experiences of the game, when the structure and game norms were still experienced as opaque. The size of the in-game world and the range of different 'zones' available to players often elicited a sense of wonder, which tended to vanish over time through familiarity and the attention other more instrumental and social commitments demanded.

This sense of immersion also increased engagement with the stories embedded in the world through 'quests', because players could focus their attention on these embedded narratives. One of the greatest complaints I heard from people in the guild was that this sense of immersion was often disrupted by the presence of other players, especially guild members who would expect some degree of interaction. This led to some unusual and quite radical responses from some of the guild members who particularly enjoyed this sense of adventure experienced through this type of immersion.

Michelle, for example, would 'anonymously' create characters on other servers where there were no guild members to interrupt her sense of immersion. She also insisted on playing the musical score which accompanied the game, which most people had turned off, in order to increase her sense of immersion. Bushe had actually taken the time to set up his own server of an earlier iteration of the game and explored it by himself, using commands that allowed him to explore parts of the game that were inaccessible on the official servers. This desire to experience moments of enchantment in and through a state of privacy was illustrative of the strength of the inculcated *habitus* that bound fantasy with intimate personal experience. Alice was just one example of a player who often preferred to play late at night time when there were far fewer players online so she could lose herself in the fantasy world.

It was even the case that in group contexts where a feature of the game was viewed as having the potential for enchantment, a temporary cessation of collective status would be announced. This occurred most frequently in raids when a raid boss was defeated for the first time. If the raid boss was a significant part of the game's narrative at the moment of defeat a 'cutscene' would often be added – the interface would be filled with a 'cinematic' screen showing an animated death scene followed by some narrative element that would set up subsequent storylines.

As might be expected, at the point of defeating a powerful raid boss for the first time there was usually a great deal of collective excitement and chatter between players, but as the cut scene began the raid leader would silence the camaraderie and for the next few minutes each individual player would allow themselves to be drawn into the enchanting experience which, at completion of the short video clip, would end as abruptly as it had begun.

These examples highlight some of the difficulties players had in producing experiences of enchantment in *World of Warcraft*. Significantly, this was not reducible to architectural constraints. As Chapter 2 demonstrated, a minority of players who practiced roleplaying sought to produce enchantment in their engagements with the game. Nor did it prevent the emergence of norms in

which architectural features were interpreted as being primarily solitary in nature, such as 'levelling' a character or raid boss 'cut scenes', but these were the exception rather than the rule and players often viewed the absence of collective activity in the game as a sign that the future of the guild was in question, usually imputed in some way to the game's shortcomings. *World of Warcraft* was conceived as a game in which its fantasy genre qualities were effectively marginalised, or at least recognisably contained, by the norms and practices that were selected as mattering and those that did not. The open-endedness and indeterminacy associated with the fantasy genre, its status as a private activity and the mystificatory inclinations of enchantment were framed as subverting the authentic purpose of the game and the collective certainties it produced.

8.9. The Value of Enchantment?

In this section I want to examine an attempt to produce a sense of collective fantasy in *World of Warcraft* in order to understand how the value of these activities was reduced through the acts of concealment that made them possible.

The example I want to discuss was a player organised 'world PvP' event that took place in 2009. World PvP took place in the 'open' game world and was organised exclusively by players – that is there were no pre-designed spaces as was the case for formal PvP for which there were 'instanced' 'Battlegrounds' and 'Arenas' that were self-contained and afforded restricted access that limited the numbers of players who could enter these locations. Critically, a world PvP event such as this was framed as a 'roleplaying' activity in which the two warring factions – the Horde and the Alliance – fought not because of some instrumental goal as was the case in the formal PVP spaces described above, but simply because the game lore was deeply rooted in the enmity between the two. Unlike formal PvP where a faction's success was metrically assigned by a points system, here victory required that the successful faction 'kill' all the players of the opposing faction and in this way it purported to be a more authentic simulation of what a battle between the Horde and Alliance would 'really' be like.

This entailed the assertion of a number of specific 'social rules' that required players to adopt different behaviours than was conventionally the case. The most significant of these was that players could not 'resurrect' their characters until after a battle was complete. In *World of Warcraft* 'death' of a player's character was more trivial than the term would suggest. On the death of a character a text box would appear on the game interface stating: "You have died. Release to the nearest graveyard?" under which a red 'button' bore the words 'Release Spirit'. On clicking this button with the cursor a slain character would appear as a 'spirit' at a 'graveyard' location, of which there were many spread across the game world, and from there would make their way back to their 'corpse' at which point another text box would appear in the interface bearing the words "Resurrect Now?" under which a red 'button' said 'Accept'. On clicking this the character would be returned to life. Some minor penalties would be imposed on the resurrected character – their health for example began at a fraction of its total and their equipment would show up as damaged and this cost in-game currency to repair. As a 'spirit' a character was invisible and could not be attacked, meaning that 'death' was more of an inconvenience, a small penalty for failure. In formal PvP 'battlegrounds' the process was further simplified – a character simply appeared at a graveyard location and could immediately re-enter the battle. For this event however, if players did not adhere to this rule the conditions for victory could not be met because it would have been virtually impossible for one side to 'kill' all the members of the opposing faction.

The other rule regarded what players could and could not say in public chat channels. As I explained in the last chapter it was common for players to banter in these channels on topics ranging from those immediately relevant to the game to more general forms such as jokes and insults. Because this was a 'roleplay' event players were expected to be 'in character' and as such public communications could only be relevant to the encounter and had to be expressed from the perspective of the character. So players could ask for aid or point out where they felt others should deploy their characters, but they could not banter or discuss anything irrelevant to the game. The only form of banter that was allowed had to be phrased in 'roleplay' terms, therefore it was acceptable to say things like 'crush the Alliance'

but not 'let's kick some Alliance butt' because the latter was not viewed as appropriate for the 'heroic' fantasy setting.

The event itself had been conceived and planned by two players in Belgium who were friends but who played on opposing factions, who used both out of game and in game networks to spread word of the event. Helkpo members became aware of the event through two players – Jewlz and Rubby - in the guild who knew the organisers outside of the game and the news was communicated through the guild chat channel and on the guild forum.

A time and location were set for the event – a Sunday afternoon - and as the time approached there was a tangible sense of anticipation and excitement. Helkpo were a Horde faction guild and our meeting point was the Swamp of Sorrows. When I arrived there were already numerous Horde players gathered waiting to set off and using the public chat channel the Horde side organiser announced that we would be leaving to confront the Alliance shortly. Soon we were on our way, an impressive sight of in excess of fifty players winding our way into the mountains to a location known as Deadwind Pass that was distinguished by a deep chasm crossed by a single, narrow bridge. During the journey there the organiser reminded us of what the 'rules' were and it was noticeable that even at this point players appeared to be adhering to the rules on banter.

As we arrived, the Alliance players were gathering on the other side of the chasm, yelling unintelligible insults at us – a designed feature of the game prevented communication between factions to reduce social tensions so comments made in public channels were scrambled into nonsensical words for players of the opposing faction. The Horde faction returned the insults in roleplaying fashion – 'For the Horde!' – being the most common. The organiser reminded us that we could not resurrect our character until the battle was formally over, there was countdown, and then battle commenced.

For around 45 minutes the two factions fought several battles all won by the Horde faction, until eventually the opposing faction was pushed back and the event fizzled out. As the opposing faction

fled, the Horde faction decided to pursue them back to their capital city, Stormwind, where, if they

killed Varian Wrynn, the ruler of Stormwind they would gain part of an achievement as well as enjoying

overrunning the Alliance faction's primary city. This was a much more chaotic affair and I found my

character split off from the main group and repeatedly killed by a combination of game controlled city

guards and players from the opposing faction.

Although it proved difficult to tell if those participating adhered to the social rules that had been

instigated for this temporary activity, there was no doubt that the vast majority did, otherwise the

event would not have lasted for as long as it did. Although there were a few examples of 'non-

roleplaying' chat in the local text channel this was infrequent and short lived. The communication

between the organisers had to bypass the architecture of the game entirely and was carried out on

VoIP software and was therefore invisible and inaudible to the majority of participants - a condition

which aided in the sense of 'immersion' that they strove to generate. In this way it resembled the

same commitment to the concealment of rules that Will employed to maintain a sense of

enchantment in the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* roleplaying game example I recounted at the beginning

of Chapter 2.

In his discussion of 'modern enchantment' Pels suggests that in the anthropological construction of

'magic' as modernity's other it is construed in terms of concealment and secrecy in contrast to the

transparency and public display of process accorded to modernity (2003). Throughout this chapter

fantasy and enchantment have figured as practices set apart from public sites of sociality characterised

by their visibility. The conception of *World of Warcraft*'s architecture as a fundamentally transparent

and legible body of information made publicly available on the internet that could be efficiently

reproduced in public performance in the game supports the resolutely modern character of the

absolute knowledge it sought to engender.

The consequences of this perceived transparency revealed not just the conventionally opaque

architecture of a videogame in intelligible terms, but also sought to render players transparent, not

just in terms of identity and accountability for actions but also in terms of 'labour'. That is a player's successes - the dungeons they had entered, the raid bosses they had defeated, the gear they had acquired – assumed to equate to a certain amount of time and energy as well as commitment. The studies of Dragon Kill Points systems I discussed in the introduction made the same point, here points were allocated to players for their participation in successful raid encounters so as well as being systems of exchange they were also visible indexes of labour in some sense.

However what these studies did not quite grasp is just how taken for granted some kinds of labour were in the game. Much has been made of the way the practices of players in MMOs suggested the imminent erasure of the distinction between work and play (e.g. Castranova 2004, Yee 2006, Dibbell 2007) but within *World of Warcraft* some forms of labour, effort and commitment were conceived as a necessary practice that legitimate engagement with the game entailed. Work in *World of Warcraft* was not exceptional, it was essential and its visibility was a function of its central significance, but not all work counted. I encountered players who undertook unusual idiosyncratic activities in the game that absorbed hours of their time – for example a player who through the production of multiple characters learned all the crafting skills in the game and kitted out all her characters in high level equipment through this process, another spent hours collecting unusual items in the game which were distributed and stored with various characters in the game – but within the game culture these activities had no value and remained private and personal acts.

This was the problem the organisers of the World PvP event struggled with – in order to legitimise the effort and commitment they put into the organisation of the event meant that they had to reveal its workings which would compromise the experience of collective enchantment they sought to generate. It was evident that a great degree of effort had been put into organising the event and ensuring that it ran smoothly, yet the voice software tool the organisers used to talk to each other throughout was exclusive to their exchanges so their efforts were concealed from the players who participated. There was clearly a desire for these kinds of events in *World of Warcraft*, stemming in

no small degree from their novelty as collective engagements with enchantment, but their status and value remained disputed.

Importantly fantasy was not conceived as an inherently private or solitary interest and neither were players unwilling to adhere to rules that prohibited normative engagements with the game, the problem was that the game culture mitigated against the value of these pursuits because concealment and obscurity was a necessary function for the successful engagement with enchantment.

The quotidian nature of *World of Warcraft*, the repetitive nature of its encounters, and the many mundane activities that constituted it as a practice was of a different tenor. Many of the same player resource sites that detailed the mechanics of performance, also contained information about the 'lore', but the language and aesthetic was more informal and its codification less explicit. Take the entry on WoW Wiki for the race of beings known as 'Titans':

> "The **titans**, also known as the **makers**[3][4][5], the **travelers** (to the trolls)[6], or the **Great Ones**
> (to the Oracles)[7], are a race of extremely powerful, majestic creatures, akin to gods.[8] These
> metallic giants traveled across the cosmos bringing order to worlds.[9] Many believe them to
> simply be a progenitor race.[10]"

The first things that is apparent is the inclusion of citation links that referred to other pages on the Wiki. This information was not self-contained but relied on external sources for its verification. The second thing that becomes evident on reading the text is the ambiguity of the terminology – 'Titans' are also known as 'the makers', 'the travellers' or 'the Great Ones'. The final sentence uses a subjunctive mood – the titans are only 'believed' to be a 'progenitor race'. Throughout the article the caveat "this section's content needs citations, references or sources" suffixed by a large yellow question mark symbol occurred again and again further emphasising the contingent and relative form of this knowledge. The concern of players that Blizzard were just 'making it up' was no doubt fuelled by the inconsistencies and incompleteness of articles like this one. This contrasts starkly with the

formal, definitive and universalised knowledge presented in relation to the architectural system of the game.

In the final section of this chapter I explore the broader context for engagements with the rationalised forms of knowledge production *World of Warcraft* enabled, beginning with an ethnographic encounter that helped me clarify my thinking on this matter.

8.10.   Engagements with the Rational

One sunny afternoon in spring 2013 I took the train from London to a suburb north of the city. I was going to visit long-term guild member Nicola and her boyfriend. I had got to know Nicola through the many occasions we met at pubs, parties, at guild 'meet-ups' and of course in *World of Warcraft* itself, but I had never actually visited her home because it was located some distance outside central London. Nicola was one of the most loyal and level-headed members of Helkpo and although she could appear quite shy at first encounter she proved to be a very warm-hearted and civil person who over time became one of the most enduring and popular members of the guild.

She also possessed an amazing level of mastery of the game which she seemed to achieve effortlessly. At the station Nicola and her boyfriend, who was introduced to me as 'Bear' were awaiting me and the drive to their flat took us through some beautiful English countryside. The drive was short and we soon arrived at their flat. As I entered I was greeted with a large freestanding white shelving unit that bisected the lounge and was full of fantasy wargame miniatures in various stages of completion. Settling myself on the sofa I noticed stacks of fantasy boardgames, a table dedicated to fantasy miniature painting and a stack of DVDs that included well-known fantasy shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. At one point I would have been surprised by this, but it had now become a familiar sight to me. Unsurprisingly a considerable volume of our discussion was dedicated to the subject of fantasy – from the familiar, *Game of Thrones*, to the obscure – in this case fantasy boardgames from the 1980s produced by the UK gaming company Games Workshop.

After lunch, Nicola beckoned me to a small room where the computer she played *World of Warcraft* was kept. It was typical of what was termed a 'spare bedroom' in British flats – narrow, dark and not really big enough to hold a 'bed'. A sofa bed had been crammed into one side of the room and on the other was a large book shelf stacked with a mixture of fantasy books, magazines, what appeared to be domestic administration and a stuffed toy 'Murloc' – a popular monster from *World of Warcraft*.

At the back of the room beneath the window was Nicola's computer desk, above which was an illustration of her in-game character. Like many players she used two monitors - one on which she played the game, while the other was used to access resources necessary to play the game. Nicola turned on her computer excitedly, logged into *World of Warcraft*, "just to see what's going on" she told me, then guided her mouse cursor to her second screen and open a folder located on its desktop. The document that flickered onto the screen was an 'Excel' spreadsheet – software designed by Microsoft for administrative purposes - that listed the roster of guild members who were raiding at the time. The horizontal axis of the document listed amongst other details the guild 'rank' of the player, their character class, level, primary and secondary specs, their 'professions', their average 'ilevel' and equipped 'ilevel'.

"This is what I do in my spare time" she said, laughing a little nervously. When I inquired why, she explained that she "enjoyed" it. She went on to explain that she worked in accounts for a local firm where she had learned how to use Excel software and in *World of Warcraft* she had found a way to "put it to good use". "I just love making them" she went on "I love the sense of order, it's one of the things I like about it". As our conversation continued she admitted that the documents she produced had virtually no practical value. She updated them on a regular basis and sent them to guild leader Chris, who, although grateful and appreciative of her efforts, never made use of them as far as she was aware - I knew that Chris possessed even more detailed records of guild members. But this factor had not prevented her engaging with this mundane administrative process of document production which she took great pleasure in creating.

As I noted in Chapter 2 there was usually a direct correlation between the minimalist aesthetic a player used for their *World of Warcraft* interface and their level of mastery of the game. Nicola's interface met this criteria, showing an almost uninterrupted view of the game world that contrasted strongly with the formal layout of the Excel spreadsheet on the adjacent screen. I asked her if the Excel document was normally displayed on the screen when she was playing. She looked at me, in a slightly amused manner, "no", she said, "it's usually this", she opened a Chrome browser and typed in "Ask Mr Robot", a player resource website I'd observed being used by many players. One of the most popular functions this site offered players was character optimisation – it could calculate what item upgrades a character required to improve a player's performance, but it also produced detailed numerical data about a player's performance and this was what Nicola chose to have displayed during play.

I asked her if she had encounter guides open when she was raiding, which was a fairly normal thing to do. Again she laughed nervously, "sometimes" she told me. Then she reached over to the shelf that I had earlier assumed contained household documentation and took a handful of A4 sheets of paper that had clearly been through a home printer. "I often use these" she explained as she revealed the printouts to be raid boss strategies. I couldn't help but be surprised. "You print them out?" I said out loud, "I've never seen anyone else do that". I immediately felt bad for doing so, but Nicola just laughed "yeah, I just find that it's easier, you can have them right next to you. I can also read them in bed".

Later as we returned to the lounge, Bear joked "did she show you her spreadsheets?", and, surrounded by miniatures and board games, we returned to the everyday realm of fantasy. Nicola's engagement with the 'bureaucratic' technologies of *World of Warcraft* seemed to represent the logical endpoint of what the game made possible. The material traces of fantasy that dominated Nicola and Bear's lounge were haphazard and incomplete: few miniatures were fully painted and although Bear had made a valiant attempt to line them up in orderly rows they appeared to have wilfully disobeyed his commands; the 1980s board games we had discussed that had been gradually pieced

together through various eBay purchases were tattered and disorderly; and the pile of DVDs tottered under its own verticality. It was all a far cry from the order and simplicity of spreadsheets and the sharply delineated infographics of Ask Mr Robot. Bureaucracy was an escape to a more orderly and systematic universe, one that Nicola threatened to push to its own thresholds of 'geekiness' that she humbly acknowledged in her self-conscious responses to my questions.

Despite her placid demeanour Nicola's enthusiasm was palpable and while we might attribute this to her skills with an Excel spreadsheet this ardour was not exclusive to her, it fired the imagination in a way fantasy games, books and TV shows did not.

I want to return to the account of the imagination given by Appadurai near the beginning of this chapter, where he claimed that in contrast with fantasy, which was autotelic and dissipatory, the imagination was projective and collective. I hope that in this chapter I have provided a sufficient account of why fantasy was usually restricted to the private domain, but here I would like to address why the rationalised knowledge of *World of Warcraft* proved to be amenable to the collective imaginary practices of players I term the 'bureaucratic imagination'.

Sneath *et al* argue that the imagination is often romanticised as a site for exceptional acts of creativity and suggest, after Kant, that it is better conceived as a "basic faculty of consciousness, a constitutive element of all human apprehension" (2009: 11). They are no doubt correct in that the imagination operates at this quotidian level, after all it is what made possible social relationships in Chapter 3 where the gaps in what people did not say had to be 'filled in' in some form. Equally we can argue that the imagination is not constructed from a single texture, but is expressed and prompted in different ways by different kinds of experiences.

I have stressed throughout this chapter that fantasy and enchantment were a mundane part of the private domain for London gamers and that by contrast the absolute knowledge produced about *World of Warcraft* was inspiring precisely because it was a novel engagement that could be enacted

in performance. In his work on the modern 'romantic ethic' Colin Campbell draws a connecting line between the novel and its capacity to prompt the imagination, stating that "if a product is capable of being represented as possessing unknown characteristics then it is open to the pleasure-seeker to imagine the nature of its gratifications" (1987: 86). While the novel in Campbell's account arises in the variety and fashions of mass consumption and was embodied in enchanting forms such as the gothic novel, for London gamers there was something exciting and different about the order and the control it promised that inhered in the 'objective', legible formality that purported to represent *World of Warcraft*'s architecture.

It was not the case that this information was experienced as pleasurable in and of itself, but the alien-ness of its systematicity, the efficacy it promised and the certainties it implied simply rendered it as something worthy of attention. This accounts for why it invoked the imagination of players, but it is less clear why it took a specifically collective form.

The obvious reason is of course that it was simply a requirement of the game if players wished to raid – individuals simply had to engage with these knowledge forms in order to be able to raid effectively. But to state it as such is a reductive account of raiding, which was fundamentally social and collective. It made raiding possible not just in a utilitarian sense, but also provided a resource for hope and inspiration, great faith was placed in the capacity for this knowledge to enable the guild to achieve its goals that players alone, as we have seen, were not entrusted with. Players in this estimation were individuals who produced partial and subjective knowledge, it was this objective external knowledge that enabled them to act and think as a collective entity.

There was also a more informal social value to this information. It's 'objective' status and therefore its de-personalised nature gave it appeal as a resource for banter because it could be debated without the revelation of any personal information. Individuals could share their opinions on it, disagree on it, and express criticism about it without ever being concerned that things could 'get personal' – a reassuring social distance could be maintained.

8.11. Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the role of fantasy in the lives of London gamers and attempted to understand why even though *World of Warcraft* had a fantasy setting, it was not a facet of the game people engaged with.

I considered how the imagination has been understood by anthropologists as a collective phenomenon while fantasy has been marginalised to the private and personal.

I demonstrated that for London gamers fantasy was used to engage with enchantment and that in English culture enchantment was a quotidian experience and was embedded in the practices of autonomy through its marginalisation in public culture.

Examining the development of the fantasy genre, I then suggested that this had also contributed to the solitary uses of fantasy because it produced indeterminate knowledge that was difficult to share and marked individuals out as 'geeky'.

Turning back to *World of Warcraft* I suggested that the same charges could be levelled at its fantasy elements and that players also felt that the developers did not take it seriously.

Using an example of a roleplaying 'world PvP' event I argue that players desired engagements of some kind of collective fantasy but the opaque nature of execution they entailed rendered them of questionable value in the game's schemes.

I end the chapter by arguing that the objective and rationalised knowledge produced about the game inspired the collective 'bureaucratic imagination' because of a combination of its novelty and its impersonal qualities that rendered it ideal for the production of social distance.

CHAPTER 5: GOVERNANCE THROUGH CERTAINTY

5.1. Framing Governance

In August 2011 less than a year after the release of the third World of Warcraft expansion, *Cataclysm*, in response to declining subscription numbers Blizzard president Michael Morhaime stated that "as our players have become more experienced playing *World of Warcraft* over many years, they have become much better and much faster at consuming content… And so I think with *Cataclysm* they were able to consume the content faster than with previous expansions, but that's why we're working on developing more content."[9] Adding to this he noted that "subscribership tends to be seasonal and driven by content updates" and that as "we're heading further away from an expansion launch, it's normal to see some declines". Blizzard would resolve this issue, he claimed, with new content that would include "major new raid and dungeon content" which would "keep the game fresh for current players, and provide compelling reasons for lapsed players to come back". Blizzard also began trialling a free-to-play feature that allowed players to play a character up to level 20, but it was clear that the onus was on creating new 'end-game' content, namely raids and dungeons.

Governance, Thomas Malaby cautions, is "not reducible to control" (2009) it is necessarily an open-ended project. How is it then that almost seven years after the launch of *World of Warcraft* Blizzard found themselves in a position that, in Morhaime's words, players were able to "consume content" faster than they could produce it, a situation that was strongly implied to have led to significant drops in subscription numbers? One of the lead designers of the initial iteration of *World of Warcraft*, Jeff Kaplan had been an enthusiastic player of the MMO *Everquest* the forerunner to *World of Warcraft* and this had a clear influence on its design. During an interview discussion about how the game design was conceived he explained: "to give a bit of background perspective, we didn't know how the end-game was going to play out exactly in *World of Warcraft*. The best that we could do was to look toward

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[9]http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/36351/World_of_Warcraft_Subscriptions_Continue_To_Decline_Though_More_Slowly.php

similar games and make some assumptions"[10] in the same interview he also made it clear that *World of Warcraft* had been targeted at people who had raided in *Everquest*. In the gaming media *World of Warcraft's* success was often attributed to the way Blizzard streamlined and polished existing game conventions and features and Kaplan's statement suggests that during its development the designers had taken what appeared to work in *Everquest* with little deliberation about what the long-term consequences of this design decision might be.

It was with the Wrath of the Lich King expansion pack that World of Warcraft saw its highest volume of subscription numbers and at this point Kaplan acknowledged that "the biggest design philosophy change between Burning Crusade and Wrath of the Lich King without a doubt was an eye toward accessibility and trying to get more players to experience more of the content, whether that be with PvP or PvE." [11] in the same interview he articulated this in more depth:

> "I think it's important to create content that's accessible. When I say accessible, I'm not saying we want 'noobs' or casual players to be able to run it, I mean even within a hardcore raiding guild. We want individuals to be able to have a full experience where their roles matter in the raid. As we bring the number down, the individual matters more. The experience in numbers may not be so epic, but the experience in depth and in actual action is a lot more epic, what the individual player is experiencing."

And:

[10] http://www.gameinformer.com/games/world_of_warcraft_cataclysm/b/pc/archive/2009/12/02/blizzard-s-jeff-kaplan-on-warcraft-s-past-and-future.aspx?PostPageIndex=3
[11] http://www.gameinformer.com/games/world_of_warcraft_cataclysm/b/pc/archive/2009/12/02/blizzard-s-jeff-kaplan-on-warcraft-s-past-and-future.aspx?PostPageIndex=2

"If you take PvE, we have to make sure that five-person groups or solo people or 10-person groups or 25-person groups, that everyone has access to really good gear and progression that they feel good about. We don't want them to feel like Blizzard is only validating one way to play. What we like to remind the hardest of the hardcore 25-person raid groups is that at the end of the day, when it comes to the best of slot items, you're still the only people with it. Just because we're doing a bit of catch-up for everyone else doesn't mean that we're diminishing your accomplishments at all."

The context for Kaplan's announcement needs to be explained as its consequences frame any understanding of the type of governance Blizzard formulated in its relationship with players. As we know, at launch the bulk of content in *World of Warcraft* was geared towards players levelling their characters – from level 1 to level 60 - and raiding was an exclusive activity for only a very tiny minority of players. The game at this point was more about exploration and wonder as it was about optimising performance in any rational sense. Expansions were increasingly weighted the other way – towards end-game content. This was because in each expansion the levelling range was much smaller – between 5 and 10 extra levels – and the new areas in which players levelled were also substantially less extensive – in most cases a single landmass was provided that was smaller than a single one of the two landmasses players had available to them in 'classic'. Even when players were not levelling their characters as quickly as they did in Cataclysm it was clear that they would complete the five or ten levels necessary to reach maximum level than they would sixty. In order to maintain subscriptions then, more players had to be able to access end-game content – raiding and to a lesser extent PvP. It is evident, intentionally or otherwise, that raiding was seen as the best way to achieve this, it had the advantage of being a prestige activity that benefitted and retained some of its exclusive status, a kind of 'symbolic capital' using Bourdieu's terminology (1977), that demonstrated a player's performative competence, that an individual knew how to play the game 'properly'. Blizzard's attention on end-game content and the architectural pathway it designed such that the majority of content appeared

to lead to its inevitability established its status as the most legitimate of pursuits in the game around which players constructed a complex of social rules that normalised and moralised it as an activity.

In the process of becoming an 'accessible' activity, however, the design of raids had to change in some fundamental ways. The raid encounters described in chapter 2, for Hodir and Shadowlord Iskar were a far cry from those in 'vanilla' World of Warcraft. Chen's ethnography of a raiding guild during the 'vanilla' era describes an activity in which much less priority was placed on knowledge and performance of complex strategy and much more significance on the social capital required to organise raids of up to 40 players (Chen 2012). Blizzard designers recognised the same, explaining that the reason it took so long for raiders in this early period to defeat raid bosses was:

> "due not to the bosses' difficulty, but rather the fact that it took even the most dedicated groups with extensive raiding experience from past MMOs that long to assemble a sufficiently large group of level-60 players who had obtained the appropriate dungeon and endgame quest gear. In many ways, that was the most challenging aspect of classic WoW raiding: the logistics of assembling and maintaining a sufficient roster with sufficient gear"[12]

What made raiding 'inaccessible' to most players then was the social organisation raiding necessitated as well as other architectural hurdles such as 'attunement' that were external and prior to the act of raiding, not the difficulty of the raid encounter itself.

During the Burning Crusade expansion raids were re-designed so that they required fewer players lowering the threshold of 'social capital' required to assemble a group of players and 'attunements' were removed as necessary criteria for entry to a raid. At the same time raiding had to be something that would retain the subscriptions of players, therefore the encounters themselves could not be as 'easy' as they had been in 'vanilla' World of Warcraft. From The Burning Crusade expansion onwards

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[12] http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/13929586

raid encounters became more complex, strategy and optimisation became obligatory practices and this in turn prompted the production of player produced guides and other player resources that were discussed in detail in chapter 2. In some respects Blizzard managed to 'have its cake and eat it' – raiding was both an activity associated with status yet was increasingly accessible to a significantly large numbers of players. By the time of the release of the game's fifth expansion, Warlords of Draenor, in 2014 there were four 'tiers' of raid difficulty – 'Raidfinder', 'Normal', 'Heroic' and 'Mythic' – that were targeted at different types of guilds and players. Each of these tiers contained the same content – that is the same encounters and narrative elements – it was just that the difficulty was scaled up or down – 'Raidfinder' was the least difficult and 'Mythic' was the most difficult - and the scale of the rewards players received from defeating encounters of different tiers reflected these variations, so ostensibly even the least committed or unguilded players could experience the same content as the most hardcore raiders, they were simply rewarded with less powerful gear and were attributed lower status.

Blizzard's primary concern then was to hold these two potentially conflicting values – status and accessibility – in balance through design: raid encounters had to present difficulty without seeming impossible, they had to engage players with the same content week after week, month after month and at the same time enable players to feel as though they were making some progress without that progress happening too quickly and outpacing the content, or alternatively stalling because an encounter proved insurmountable. As chapter 2 explained, raid encounters were presented as content that virtually any player could complete and therefore attain a full experience of the game even if it took some players significantly longer to do so than others. If Blizzard's goal was to retain subscription numbers through this approach its success on this count is questionable – following the peak numbers of subscriptions in 2008's Wrath of the Lich King, 'seasonal' spikes dropped with each successive expansion and subscription numbers dropped more quickly subsequent to the launch of new content. On the other hand the design goal of retaining the dual status of raiding can be considered successful in that although longer term players felt that raiding was no longer the prestige

activity it had been at launch, the architectural conditions of the game established it as the most desirable activity – the 'real' reason for playing - and the content that came before it to some extent was rendered as content players had to complete to be able to access raids. The measure of Blizzard's legitimacy was assessed on the perceived quality of raid encounters. At its inception, raiding in *World of Warcraft* was viewed as a somewhat marginal if exclusive and high status activity, but less than six years after its launch it had become the foundational and normative performative activity in the game. What Blizzard failed to retain in terms of the 'economic capital' of subscription fees, they arguably managed to achieve in the 'symbolic capital' of raiding.

In his account of symbolic capital Bourdieu holds that its value resides in the discrepancy between something's 'economic' value and the value it is attributed socially - the investment of 'honor' that inheres in it and produces its effects and value (1977). The former he explains, is not 'unknown', but is 'socially repressed' such that to speak of it is to court dishonour. In the first instance a kind of idea of exclusivity remained associated with raiding even though on some counts over 70% of players participated in the activity based on admittedly unofficial statistics[13]. Players who voiced the opinion that raiding had somehow been diminished tended to be presented as misguided nostalgics who viewed the earliest iterations of World of Warcraft through 'rose-tinted glasses'. Claims made about the quality of raiding in the game during my fieldwork were typically substantiated by the technical quality of 'design' - that the newer raid encounters were technically superior to those of the past. The increased accessibility of raiding was treated as a *non sequitur*, too obvious to be of concern or evidence that a player failed to grasp what the game was really about. The game's architecture evinced commitment to the value of raid encounters through technical quality and underpinned the social status that it carried. Claims that Blizzard focussed on raiding at the expense of other parts of

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[13] http://www.mmo-champion.com/content/3984-armory-stats-siege-of-orgrimmar-progression-blue-tweets-dlc-439

the game were simply viewed as proof of the value of raiding and players might direct ire at Blizzard

if they felt resources were being directed at other less 'important' features of the game.

Bourdieu also discusses how acts of labour constituted symbolic value, 'unnecessary' acts carried out

as though they were functionally significant (1977). An unforeseen outcome of these changes in raid

encounter design and the player-produced material that accompanied it was that players spent a

considerable amount of time engaging with *World of Warcraft* outside of the game itself. While there

were online guides and sources for earlier MMOs such as *Everquest* they were not nearly as numerous,

varied and detailed as they were for *World of Warcraft*. The symbolic value of raiding was borne out

in the rationalisation of the knowledge that came to constitute it. Raiding was not just performance

in the game, it necessitated engagement with and the production of knowledge: research,

organisation, formal methods of recruitment, promotion and demotion. As we've seen these activities

had much broader ramifications than the in-game performances they produced, they transformed

raiding into an act of rational and calculative worth and this was an epistemological quality that

coloured the discursive forms through which Blizzard exerted its governance. Blizzard's control of the

symbolic capital in the game was contingent upon the knowledge players felt they possessed, the

belief in the transparency of the mechanics of the game, because this in some way placed some control

in the hands of players.

5.2. Control as Certainty

Given the emphasis Malaby places on the tensions between control and contingency in the practices

of governance, my intention is to deflect the issue of absolutes by addressing the concept of certainty.

While 'control' conveys a sense of the absolute, 'certainty' allows for a certain amount of latitude in

terms of how outcomes may be arrived at; certainty holds a quality of reassurance, rather than the

dictatorial implications of control. As a term it tends to be used in relation to the concepts of tradition

and ritual (James 1995, Appadurai 1996), that some activities possess a transcendent quality that

disavows the contingencies of the temporal. Tradition and ritual in this sense are not forms for the

definitively absolute, they do not configure life in an entirely rational framework, they punctuate it at crucial points - they are constituted by acts that re-affirm values rather than directly impose them. The relational qualities that pertain between games, ritual and bureaucracy mean that hard lines are sometimes not easily drawn between the three, a fact Malaby acknowledges (2009). In the context of digital gaming, Schüll's deeply insightful account of the workings of electronic gambling machines is exemplary of the way all three of these forms may interact. This centred on a chip that contained "the game's script for chance – the interlocking set of calculative operations that "operationalize chance"… so as to determine game outcomes" (2012: 77). The seemingly contradictory functions of this chip meant that it could lend "a measure of predictability to chance" that informed casino operators of their returns over time, while at any moment in time it rendered "chance ever-more inscrutable" (ibid). Schüll explores the technologies that enabled gambling machine manufacturers to 'lengthen the odds' in their favour, while preserving the appearance of chance through 'virtual reel mapping' where the virtual reels offered a much reduced chance of winning for players, while the physical reels they were mapped onto and that were presented to players implied much better odds. As such "the disparity between actual and virtual reels gave the game manufacturers a considerably more precise way to *control* game outcomes, making it possible for them to promise huge jackpots on the outcomes with the slimmest mathematical odds" (Ibid: 87, my emphasis). While actual occurrences of wins could not be predicted, what was certain was that there would be far fewer wins and that outcomes would favour the casino operators not the players. Far from putting players off, Schüll explains that players were simply more enchanted by this technologically inscribed 'magic' that enabled them to go further into 'the zone' that enabled a loss of self. The latter itself describes a kind of combination of transcendence, contingency and certainty.

A common theme throughout the previous three chapters was the way that, performed appropriately, *World of Warcraft* could negate phenomenological experiences of immersion, enchantment and 'deep play', that externalities to the game rendered such captivation difficult to achieve and maintain. To the degree that players experienced some sense of control, Blizzard rarely exercised the same degree

of certainty as the gambling machine manufacturers in Schüll's study. It was quite evident that design decisions made by Blizzard were affected by occurrences that were beyond the company's control, whether they related to infrastructure that caused servers to crash, complexities of code that caused bugs in the game or the unexpected responses of players to design features. The question was less whether forms of governance were more or less in control but how they engaged with and responded to the exigencies of these dynamics. In Malaby's account of Linden Labs we are provided with a series of learnings and events through which the organisation embraced uncertainty by placing a set of (limited) tools in the hands of users and acknowledging, contra their expectations, that the majority of users would be consumers of goods made by others not producers of goods or gamers (2009). Linden Labs maintained authority and retained control of essential resources such as low level code, but attempts to encourage users to adopt certain aesthetics or activities in any uniform sense simply did not bear out. Blizzard by contrast seemed to view the unexpected acts of players as a problem of design that necessitated the implementation of new features that re-aligned or constrained these observed behaviours. This process of altering the code, the architecture of the game, materialised Blizzard's strategy for affecting forms of certainty because they were based on observable behaviour. It was common for Blizzard to announce a change to the game by stating something along the lines of: 'we've noticed that players were doing *x* so we have accommodated this by adding *y* feature to the game'. Take this example from a series of 'dev watercooler blog' entries that discussed raid design since World of Warcraft's launch:

> "At The Burning Crusade's release, the 25-player *raid content was mistuned*: In many ways, encounters like the original Gruul and Magtheridon picked up where Naxxramas had left off, providing stern challenges for the best guilds in the world, *but presenting a brick wall to the rest of the raiding population*. *This was corrected* by Patch 2.1 a few months later, which also established the precedent that each expansion's raids would be self-contained and would *provide an entry point for players who were brand new to raiding*" (my emphases).

In typical Blizzard fashion an error was recognised – 'raid content was mistuned' - with the current design of the game – in this case a 'brick wall' that prevented large numbers of players from experiencing raid content – that was 'corrected' through changes made to the way the game was designed and coded. Through the incorporation in code of a response to player behaviour we can understand Blizzard to have been exerting a kind of control – what could be coded could be controlled or at least was more easily subject to control. There is a sense in which we could view the repeated processes of codification of unexpected player behaviour as a kind of engagement with uncertainty, an acknowledgement of the transitory and impromptu nature of human action. But acknowledgement is not the same as acceptance. Changes made to the game's architecture might not have guaranteed the desired responses in terms of player behaviour - there always remained some form of unpredictable response - but the extent of this open-endedness was expressly more finite. Transforming something into coded architecture produced a more predictable array of possibilities that, at least hypothetically, were in some sense *more* certain, even if not entirely so. Unlike Linden Labs, who in the end loosened the leash, for want of a better metaphor, even if they did not entirely let go of it, Blizzard continuously attempted to tighten the leash and drive players toward the activities they wanted them to engage with.

That many of these design decisions were not permanent or did not work out did not at any point seem to undermine Blizzard's confidence in this procedure. The same hope that fuelled the belief in predictable outcomes for players seemed to serve the collective imagination of Blizzard's design teams. Practices of control then need not be measured by outcomes solely but by the intent of actions. Blizzard exhibited a tendency to resolve issues through practical rather than discursive solutions, a trait common to software developers (Kelty 2008, Malaby 2009), performative acts that demonstrated the efficacy of the belief in a tangible and non-conditional way. But there was another source through which legitimacy was achieved the existence of which was somewhat external to practice and the immediate efforts of Blizzard, even if its existence was formulated by the same. This was the concept of the 'system' as an entirely knowable and transparent object. My argument rests

on the understanding that both players and developers were oriented in different ways around this concept in order to legitimise their actions. One of the important qualities attributed to the system was its 'indifference'. The conception of human fallibility attributed to both players and developers, was held to be the locus of errors, mistakes and failures. Code manifest as the outcome of an individual, a team or any form of human agency could be at fault, but the abstract system that was a consequence of these practices was ascribed its own autonomy, not in the sense of artificial intelligence or some other form of simulation of human agency, but as something that was in this sense 'not human' in as much as it was not capable of exhibiting the same questionable biases that were attributed to humans. One way in which we might distinguish fundamental differences between what Linden Labs sought to do and what Blizzard sought to do might be to describe the former as more concerned with the outcomes of complex systems while the latter where more concerned with the system itself and the systematization of behaviour, particularly those experiences of the game that may have some effect on the likelihood of a player's decision to raid.

In this respect World of Warcraft was closer to the electronic gambling machines in Schüll's study than the *Second Life* platform. The design of the 'systems' in gambling machines did not eliminate chance, they were carefully managed to employ chance to engage and mystify players while ensuring the outcome was ultimately always favourable to the casinos. By altering the game's code to better fit with the behaviours of players or indeed altering the behaviour of players, Blizzard were acknowledging the unpredictability of player actions and in the most extreme cases attempted to remove or at least reduce the possibility for them. In the same way that gambling machines were not designed with the prediction of every outcome in mind, so the relative degree of Blizzard's control was focused on some kinds of activities and behaviours in the game and not on others. Naturally these concerns tended to focus on interactions that related to raiding in some way, in particular those that implicated interaction between players, especially if they were or were likely to be anonymous.

5.3. Re-coding Sociality

A principal way that *World of Warcraft* differed from *Second Life* and the users of electronic gambling machines was that while the latter were typically conceived as individuals with implications for the emergence of holistic social and cultural practices, for the former players were as often conceived as social or collective entities that were already in some way enmeshed in relationships. This was immediately evident in the way Blizzard 'typologised' collective entities such as guilds when they imagined how players engaged with the game. Blizzard was well aware that players were frequently introduced to *World of Warcraft* by friends and that the architectural constraints of the game did not necessarily facilitate these relationships as well as they might. One of the responses to this issue was to include features specifically designed for friends that applied 'bonuses' for collective play. For example 'Recruit a Friend' was a feature that enabled an existing player to 'invite' a friend to play which would reward that player with in-game rewards and some 'free' playing time, importantly when two friends played together in a group they received a huge boost to the experience points they gained so that the newer player might 'catch up' with the existing ('veteran') player's characters. In acknowledging that players were as much social as individual and designing features that accommodated this Blizzard might be seen as presenting an alternative model to that of the individualistic, self-maximising consumer, but it was also sensible commercial practice for a game of this genre. Equally, although sociability was a core element of the game it was also a site of considerable risk and uncertainty. If players were unpredictable and prone to failure as individuals these problems were liable to intensify in social interaction. Blizzard faced the unenviable task of designing the game to bring people together in various forms of social interaction and at the same time ensuring that these interactions transpired as smoothly as possible so as not to put-off players from participating in the group content that was so critical to Blizzard's business.

Chapter three detailed some of the ways in which the design of World of Warcraft's architecture constituted players as knowable forms of personhood through the mechanographic reproduction of 'accounts' that were deemed more 'objective' than those provided by players, but this was just one

way in which Blizzard was involved in reducing the uncertainty of social encounters between players. Another way that proved increasingly popular for both Blizzard and players alike was the 'automation' of certain social interactions. Over various iterations of the game Blizzard employed a range of features that attempted to resolve issues players experienced or complained about when it came to group experiences. Although players might prefer to rely on guild members for this kind of activity, this was not always possible and people often had to group with 'anonymous' players. In the first iteration of World of Warcraft players had the option to use the 'Looking For Group' (LFG) channel, a 'chat' channel into which a player could type a request that was visible to other players, but this was localised meaning only players in a given zone could see a player's requests and was later globalised so that requests were visible no matter where a player's character was in the game world. The 'Looking For Group' interface feature was added in 2007 automated some of the processes of finding players for specific group activities – namely the need for a player to repeatedly announce their requirements in chat. Blizzard expected this tool to replace the need for the dedicated 'LFG' channel, but many players began using the 'Trade' channel in its absence. Although the 'LFG' tool reduced the labour required to find group members, players still often had to spend time travelling to a dungeon or other location.

The 'Dungeon Finder' introduced in 2009 added further features. Firstly it drew players from across 'realms' (different servers), expanding the pool of players from which it could draw and it transported all the players to the dungeon they wished to complete as soon as they were ready to enter it. The intention of these features was to make finding groups and completing dungeons a more efficient and less time consuming experience for players. It was not just designed to encourage players to complete dungeons more frequently, but also to encourage more players to raid, both of which fit with Blizzard's design strategy to increase use of end-game content across the player base. The completion of dungeons through the Dungeon Finder feature was incentivised by rewards of 'gold' and various token types that could be collected and exchanged for desirable items of gear. Unlike the 'LFG' tool launched

in 2007, the Dungeon Finder was much more popular with players and the same premise was used for the Raid Finder tool added in 2011 and the Group Finder tool in 2014.

The question of whether any of these tools were strictly 'necessary' is moot. Certainly people complained about the difficulty of finding other players with whom they could form groups, yet at the same time some players had established reliable networks based on some degree of trust – forms of social capital – that were not reliant on architectural features of the game and many of these players felt that these features had eroded the 'community' feel of the game. For Blizzard however these relations were subject to forms of social contingency that affected their capacity to fulfil their objectives - to encourage more players to engage with end-game content - because not all players had the same levels of social capital necessary to have developed a reliable source of contacts from which to easily find players with whom to group. At a collective level then, social capital was unevenly distributed across players and was a resource over which Blizzard exercised very limited control. The game's architecture encouraged the production of social relations but it could not guarantee that every player would be part of a network of reliable and trusted players. Dungeon Finder diminished the exclusive value of social capital and represented something of a trade-off of trust for convenience in terms of the sociality that it produced. Players may have found themselves grouped with one or more players whose performance they classified as unsatisfactory, and if this was the case a player judged so could be removed, 'kicked', from the group and the empty slot would be re-filled by the Dungeon Finder feature. The immediate issue would be resolved, but these relationships seldom produced trust because interaction between players was so fleeting and little in the way of reputation was at stake and this remained a troublesome aspect of social contingency for Blizzard that could detract from their goals for the game.

Trust itself was a form of certainty that was an emergent consequence of social relations. In a simplified sense, trust was the assumption that a person or persons would behave in a certain way. In World of Warcraft groups that included strangers could be tense affairs in which the performances

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of players were placed under tremendous scrutiny. The site at which this was most fraught was the distribution and acquisition of loot. One of the earliest features in the game designed to facilitate the distribution of loot was the 'need before greed' system. When an item of some value was dropped by an enemy defeated by a group, players had to state their claims to the item by responding to one of three (later four) options presented by the game's interface; 'need', 'greed' or 'pass'. Players who chose 'need' were prioritised over those who chose 'greed' and those who chose 'pass' declined to make any claim to an item. If more than one player chose 'need' the decision as to who was given the item was decided by the game's 'random number generator' – stochastic chance. Ideally a player would only choose 'need' if they genuinely required the item in question, that is it was superior to the item of the same type they already possessed, but there always remained the possibility that a player might choose 'need' spuriously in the eyes of other members of the group. The belief that features such as Dungeon Finder increased the likelihood of this happening was attributed to the lack of consequences for those who did so and the absence of any form of accountability that could be invoked.

As far as I'm aware the possibility of coding a kind of accountability into the game to counter the absence of trust was never discussed, but Blizzard developed an alternative approach to the problem through the function of 'Personal Loot'. This was introduced to, in Blizzard's words, reduce 'loot contention' and 'drama'. Instead of 'dropping' for the group as a whole, who then had to decide how an item or items should be distributed, loot was now awarded to individual players by the game's architecture which removed decision-making from players and bypassed the issues that might arise in response to the outcomes of player based decisions. One way to understand the addition of features such as the Dungeon Finder and Personal Loot would be to explain them as architectural means to preclude certain forms of player agency, which to some extent is true, but not entirely so. In a developer blog post explaining how the changes to Personal Loot would differ from what came before, lead designer Greg 'Ghostcrawler' Street stated:

Here is how looting works in today's Raid Finder groups:

- The boss dies.

- The game randomly decides which items off of the boss's loot table drop.

- The group rolls Need, Greed, or Pass on each item.

- If you were raiding with a group of friends, you might discuss who should get each item. Even if you ultimately lost, hopefully you are happy that a friend got an upgrade and that your group as a whole is now a little bit stronger.

- But if you're in Raid Finder, you are quite possibly alone with a bunch of strangers.

- So, if you can Need, you probably do, because there's no time for discussion, some of the rollers may be AFK, and even if you piss someone off, you aren't likely to have to pay the social cost of doing so since you'll never see them again.

- The highest roll wins.

- Drama ensues.

Here's how the new Raid Finder system will work in Mists of Pandaria:

- The boss dies.

- The game automatically decides who won some loot, and gives those players a spec-appropriate item.

- *Some players may still get mad, but hopefully they are mad at the laws of probability and not at the rest of the raid*.

(My emphasis)

What Street's simplified account of the changes alludes to is that, rather than removing the potential frustrations or disappointments of players, the outcome of the Personal Loot form of distribution was intended to re-direct the agency of players toward 'the laws of probability'. Chance always had a role in the acquisition of loot – it dictated what loot would drop from a boss and the outcomes of 'need'

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or 'greed' rolls or other uses of RNG – but it combined and contended with the actions of players and given the status of players as unpredictable and fallible subjects they constituted the appropriate targets of blame. Chance then was a secondary agent that responded to the primary decisions of players. With Personal Loot Blizzard designed chance to be the primary agent of distribution. Even if we acknowledge the undercurrent of flippancy in Street's explanations, we must also admit that chance was conceived of as an agent, but one that lacked the same divisive intentionality that players possessed - it was incapable of subjective states attributed to players such as bias or favouritism and it could not be held accountable. In Schüll's study chance was a force of mystification through its inscrutability, in *World of Warcraft* it was a force of rationality because its assertion as an agent prevented, or at least limited, the prospect of inappropriate performances by players. Blizzard, in Hacking's term (1990), 'tamed' chance and deployed it to further the possibility of success of the game's design goals which were largely accomplished if they were measured in terms of the number of players who chose to use the Raid Finder tool.

5.4. Player Power

If the behaviours of players were, or at least could be, subject to codification by Blizzard what does this say for the nature of the asymmetry between producers and players? Edward Castranova has compared the producers of virtual worlds to 'dictators' (2005) and MMO innovator Richard Bartle has described them as 'gods' (2004), but both of these epithets gloss over some of the nuances of the relationship. There is little doubt that as an organisation they operated a vertical form of governance, but it was not all-encompassing in either an incidental or intentional way - players as 'consumers' could choose to stop playing if they felt they were not getting what they wanted without fear of punitive retaliation, for example, and this should not be overlooked as a significant player resource. But as Taylor states, players established relationships with games that extended beyond a commodity relationship (2006b). People related to the game for numerous reasons, not least because relationships were established and mediated by it, so if a player wished to continue playing the game but was not entirely happy with some aspect of it what recourse did that have available to them? The

truth was that within the game players had few if any formal or legal rights, but in practice players acted as though they did and were treated to some degree as if they did by Blizzard, importantly the actions of players sometimes appeared to have results. This throws a fundamental challenge to Lessig's claim that 'code is law' (2006). The ease and speed with which Blizzard sometimes demonstrated in responding to issues belies the intractable associations Lessig's epithets suggest.

The most obvious way in which players exercised their 'rights' was to voice their opinions on proprietary platforms as well as other public and private spaces, even if Blizzard's response was neither guaranteed nor expected. On the official forums Blizzard employees, referred to as 'community managers', would occasionally respond to the questions or complaints of players, but as far as they concerned issues pertaining to game design they lacked the authority to provide immediate resolutions. Blizzard regularly claimed that they 'listened' to what players said on these sites and to varying degrees, in various cases a cause and effect was visible in changes made to the game. However the process of these decision-making practices was almost always opaque - a key trait of top-down governance. Players did not know if Blizzard were actually 'listening' to a particular complaint and even if they were whether they would respond to it. In this relationship players could be seen as 'participating' in the process of governance, but were rendered 'partial' as Taylor describes it, that although "through their participation they help[ed] shape the technology, as well as alter and extend the mechanics of the games… this participatory core [was] generally only a partially acknowledged and leveraged fact." (2006b). The admission of player produced 'mods' to *World of Warcraft* that altered the game's UI and players' experience of the game demonstrates one area in which Blizzard allowed players to affect governance. That Blizzard incorporated the ideas behind several of these 'mods' into the standard interface experience is a potent example of the two-way effects of the relationship between players and producers. The two-way dynamic was anything but equal, however, the choice to develop a mod into the game was exclusively Blizzard's and as Kow and Nardi explain Blizzard claimed ownership of the mods and could assert control over issues such as payment (2010).

There was also a clear line drawn between what players could and could not change about the game through mods.

Yet there were two ways in which players were given provision to express 'power' in the game and it's perhaps unsurprising that both of these forms were made possible on Blizzard's terms. The first was a very literal form of player power the second a more conceptual form of power. A significant change to the design of World of Warcraft that has not been explicitly discussed up to this point is the way that the narrative structure of the game was designed. I have noted how Blizzard streamlined the process of levelling to make it simpler. For example 'quest chains' that drove players to explore in 'classic' World of Warcraft could often end up being highly convoluted affairs and players could easily become lost or find themselves having to traverse long distances. When Blizzard re-designed these lower level zones in 2010 they removed many of these obstacles to advancement and also produced more coherent narrative trajectories.

Another characteristic of classic World of Warcraft was that the narratives characters experienced through quests were of a fairly quotidian nature. That is characters were, in the grand scheme of the fictional setting of the game, not very important. They were in many respects little more than 'foot soldiers' for the faction they chose. Subsequent iterations of the game sought to change this and, within quest narratives, present the role of players as more pivotal to world changing events. During the release of the Wrath of the Lich King expansion Blizzard compared it favourably to the previous expansion because players would encounter the eponymous Lich King as they progressed through levelling content as well as in higher level dungeons and raiding contexts. One of the reasons given for this decision was that it made players feel more significant. This continued into the following expansion Cataclysm where the primary antagonist a dragon called Deathwing might suddenly appear at any point in the game world leaving a trail of deadly fire I his wake that could immolate unsuspecting players. In these expansions, a new technology called 'phasing' enabled players to participate in momentous events and encounter legendary characters. There was a conscious attempt by Blizzard

to make players feel more 'powerful'. Explaining the rationale behind the many disasters that characterised the game's setting, lead quest designer Dave Kosak stated:

> "Here at Blizzard, we often talk about what we're trying to build with the fiction of the Warcraft universe. The phrase "Hero Factory" frequently comes up across all of our franchises. We want the players to feel like heroes."[14]

This design principle extended beyond the narrative features of the game to the mechanics and the signification of 'power'. One of Blizzard's concerns about the implementation of the item 'squish' discussed in chapter 2, which would cause the numerical values associated with items to be significantly reduced, was that players would feel less 'powerful'. When the item 'squish was applied in 2014 Blizzard communication to players was emphatic that the reduction was relative:

> "It's important to understand that this isn't a nerf—in effect, you'll still be just as powerful, but the numbers that you see will be easier to comprehend. This also won't reduce your ability to solo old content. In fact, to provide some additional peace of mind, we're implementing further scaling of your power against lower-level targets so that earlier content will be even more accessible than it is now."[15]

Interestingly Blizzard evidently felt that they needed to rea-assure players by actually increasing the 'power' at lower levels of play.

At the 2010 Games Developers Conference, Rob Pardo, then Executive Vice President of Blizzard explained that one of their core design concepts across all of Blizzard's game properties was to 'Make Everything Overpowered', stating:

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[14] http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/3992143
[15] http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/13107743

"We want to take everything to 11… Every unit and class has to feel like this unit and class cannot be stopped. That's the feeling we want to give."[16]

As well as being defined by Blizzard, 'power' in this sense was an aesthetic restricted to the game world - it evidently did not extend as far as the relationship between players and Blizzard. Yet they held a firm belief that the greater the level of 'power' a player felt they possessed the more fun a player would have, and fun, as the next section will elaborate, was a key design goal beyond the specifics of how it was achieved. While the relative 'power' of a given character or more often a given character class was always in question for players it was difficult to deny that the effect of player entanglements in the game setting's narrative stakes did not enhance the kind of symbolic capital that accrued to players. Within the setting of *World of Warcraft* power was constantly contested, kings and kingdoms rose and fell, factions allied temporarily, and opposing claims were mired in ambiguity and historic misdeeds, yet there was always a reliable 'evil' the threat of which overwhelmed the everyday shades of grey, and it was clear were power legitimately belonged. So it was that the game was designed for players to 'win' and power to be dispossessed of whichever evil force had lain claim to it and the restoration, if temporarily of the cosmic order.

5.5. Designer/Players

There is one final form of player power that I want to discuss that, again, operated largely on Blizzard's terms – the concept of the 'designer/player'. Taylor also notes that "Designers are always already working with a model of the user (sometimes real, but just as often imagined) when they approach the process of creation. This formulation plays a powerful role in how the space is circumscribed for the eventual user in terms of what is deemed not only legitimate use, but more fundamentally, what identities are sanctioned and inscribed within the artifact" (2006b). Blizzard, who, as a large videogames company went, were relatively open about their processes, acknowledged their use of models of *World of Warcraft*'s players as discussed in the previous section, but during a keynote

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[16] http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/118583/GDC_Blizzards_Core_Game_Design_Concepts.php

speech at the Games Developer's Conference in 2007, Blizzard President Mike Morhaime spoke at a presentation that explained the company's philosophies and approaches that had led to the success of the business. When it came to the subject of how the developers made design decisions their goal was to make games that were inclusive to people with different play styles, but there were also decisions that necessitated an alternative approach:

> "There are other decisions that you have to make where it's really – you have a choice you can go one way or the other and sometimes we think that these are objective calls – going one way maybe *makes the game better regardless of what people are telling us that they think that they want*, we're able to look and see that there are sometimes design reasons why one design is actually superior to the other design, so *we don't second guess ourselves by designing for other people, we're our own target market, that's the way we look at it. We play our games, everyone at Blizzard plays our games and so we feel that if we like our games then other people outside the walls will like them, we don't view it as a guessing game*" (my emphases)

Two points emerge from this: the first that Blizzard claimed that sometimes what players wanted was not necessarily conducive to producing a 'better' game; and that secondly the designers of World of Warcraft imagined themselves to be their 'own target market' – the claim is framed not by the distinction between producers and players but between players within the walls of the company and those outside it. Further, in identifying themselves as such Morhaime claimed that it removed much of the risk, the 'guessing', from the process of making decisions about how the game should have been designed. It was of course common throughout the videogame industry, for employees of game developer companies to be 'gamers' but rarely was it made so explicit and with specificity to the developer's own games as it was here. Within academic work, when this kind of blurring between consumers and producers has been given attention it has tended to be on the ways consumers, or 'fans', perform as producers – such as modding - not the other way around (e.g. Jenkins 1992). While the 'prosumer' and other models that re-position the creative practices of 'consumers' are held up as

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participants in the evening out of stringent asymmetries, Blizzard's claims to the status of 'players' of their own games simply seemed to assert their privileged position as better informed to make design decisions, regardless of what players 'outside the walls' might have desired.

Noting the asymmetry however reveals little about how Blizzard conceived of the player status of their designers as a means to preclude 'guessing'. It's tempting to reduce Blizzard's use of design as a technocratic tool to control the behaviours of players, it was clear however that the intention tended to be to reduce the possible range of actions rather than dictate actions themselves. At its most crude, design can be conceived as the simple embodiment of intentionality - a direct line of agency from designer, through designed object to user. This is a world Donald Norman alludes to, where the blame for human mishap is largely attributed to the failures of designed objects because certain principles of design have not been adhered to by those who were responsible for their design (1988). Suchman's work goes some way to challenging this supposition concerning the simple transference of intention to designed object or interface (2007). For Suchman what defined machines was their limited access to resources with which they could communicate with users, but if we broaden the scope of HCI to accommodate not just more functional activities such as using a photocopier but less easily defined qualia, subjective experiences and 'feelings', novel questions are posed to the conventions of design as either embodied intentionality or cognitive finitude. A central concern of game designers was that players should have 'fun' and this was something Blizzard commonly reiterated when representatives talked in more general terms about what they wanted players to experience when they played World of Warcraft.

As a design issue 'fun' has been broached most notably by MMO designer Raph Koster for whom 'fun' is a biochemical response to acts of mastery, which he describes as the brain's desire to learn and in which 'fun' is maintained as long as the player continues to 'learn' (2005), a state comparable to Csizentmihalyi's notion of 'flow'. Edward Castranova's definition follows closely on Koster's, but adopts a more evolutionary perspective for its description of fun as "pleasure that comes from winning

at the game of evolutionary adaptation" (2007: 104). Even Norman uses the word fun to describe the

kind of frictionless movement and engagement people should experience with designed objects in

which things get done with the greatest efficiency (1988). These definitions are highly instrumental -

for these three authors, 'fun' is something that can be intentionally designed into things because the

experience can be reduced to an unambiguous state or outcome. But if Blizzard did have a similar

'model' of fun they did not articulate it publicly, it was as often used in rhetorical ways to legitimise

design decisions. For example at the 2010 Games Developer's Conference Executive Vice President of

Game Design, Rob Pardo explained that:

> "Before anything else, you want to concentrate the game on the fun. All aspects of the game
>
> - the design, the mechanics of encounters, the quests and story are focused on making the
>
> game fun to play. Not only fun to play - but fun to play for players, not developers. The
>
> challenge is to keep players jumping through the correct hoops, while making those hoops
>
> fun. Sometimes this involves making some changes -- for example, only night elf males could
>
> be druids in *Warcraft III*, but for the sake of making the druid class, something that sounded
>
> like all kinds of fun, they had to be made accessible to both genders, and both sides. So the
>
> lore was adjusted so that females and tauren could both be druids - otherwise they couldn't
>
> have introduced the class at all. And that wouldn't be any fun."[17]

Pardo uses the term to encompass every aspect of game play without ever really providing a stable

account of what this experience was for players. It's used to describe how to direct player activity and

sometimes required sacrificing pre-existing elements of the game world's 'lore'. Notably, he also

emphasised that the experience needed to be fun for 'players' not just 'developers'. A further clue to

understanding how Blizzard conceived of the term can be gleaned from the online recruitment advert

for a game designer which explains that:

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[17] http://www.engadget.com/2010/03/12/rob-pardo-speaks-about-blizzard-game-design/

Designers find the joy in our game concepts

Game designers shape the challenges and tune the weapons that our players run amok with.

As a designer, you'll make sure that our games delight the mind with interesting interactions between players and AI. You'll construct mechanics that don't require a manual to understand, keeping in mind that the best games are easy to learn, but difficult to master. It'll be your job to create fun for everyone, from hardcore competitors to plug-and-play weekend gamers.

Blizzard designers aren't just "idea people"—they find elegant and enduring designs everywhere, and implement them effectively with scripting, layout and testing. With world editing software at your fingertips, you'll iterate until your gameplay shines as brightly as any gorgeous environment or stirring soundtrack. *When your co-workers can't stop playing what you've made, then you'll know you've found the fun*.[18] (my emphasis)

The last sentence is probably the most definitive account of fun that I was able to find and is highly informative. Broadly we can see the importance placed on sharing ideas and iterations with other team members, which is a work practice Blizzard often referred to, in this sense Blizzard's 'philosophy' for game design ran counter to the assumption that intent alone was the principle of design. The effect of design was not guaranteed but had to be empirically tested and the sign of success – 'fun' - was located in the behaviour of 'co-workers'. Fun appears to have constituted an open-ended and unpredictable experience, not something that could be designated as a predictable outcome of the intension of design, it was an experiential quality the locus of which was in people's engagement rather than as a technical quality of systems. A game design feature or mechanic could not then be fun in and of itself, fun was one of the unpredictable qualities of human subjects. The framing of

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[18] http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/careers/roles/design.html

designers as players who shared these subjective experiences then, can be appreciated as a way to assess an effect of design that would otherwise elude the process and effectively produce a greater sense of certainty, remove some of the 'guessing' that would otherwise prevail. Fun was something that had to be 'found' externally to design, it was an emergent property rather than a technical accomplishment that could only be discovered through the empirical practice of player engagement with an iteration of design.

5.6. The Certainty of Change

For players, the view that *World of Warcraft*'s architecture and mechanics were systematic, legible and fundamentally transparent constituted the grounds for the possibility of the certainty of outcomes. Even though the 'system' changed regularly this was not seen to undermine its essentially knowable form – it would only be a matter of time for this knowledge to be revealed and rendered legible for players. Change is not conventionally associated with certainty or order but, as with the concept of modernity as a kind of 'rupture' - with upheaval and the disruption of certainties such as tradition and ritual. For players, change effectively proved the exacting nature of the 'system', because regardless of how extensive changes were they were always reducible to the same systematic and ordered forms of knowledge – change was a matter of form not essence and through systematisation and codification its novel effects were only ever temporary. For World of Warcraft's designers the possibility for the enactment of 'change' was an essential conceptual and practical resource for the production of certainties and the organisation's legitimacy as game developers and designers. The promise change was invested with was directly related to the contingencies of player behaviour and the general uncertainty of action that was understood to emerge from the complexity of the system, whether that was bugs in the code or the impact on infrastructure.

In this imagining any case of the unexpected was *only* contingent, its problematic status was only a temporary concern that was ultimately resolvable in practical terms if not in an absolute sense. The principal measure against which the effect of change was assessed was 'fun', that here performed as

a collective sense of player satisfaction, and 'developer time', a practical consideration of the labour required to make a change given its status as a finite resource. Blizzard acknowledged that not every change made to *World of Warcraft* was successful, but there remained an ideological commitment to a design driven narrative that supposed the outcome of the cumulative succession of change as a more 'fun' experience for players. This was underpinned by teleologically informed narratives that demonstrated the linear progress of the game through the addition of new features, the improvement of existing ones and the occasional overhaul of a mechanic. An example of this kind of narrative at its most emphatic was a series of three blog posts published on the official World of Warcraft website in 2014 titled 'Raiding Azeroth' that recounted the changes Blizzard had made to raiding in the game. As well as detailing the history of raiding, these posts were focussed toward the release of the fifth expansion, Warlords of Draenor, planned for release later in the year. Although the story was not one of outright success, a story that would only have undermined Blizzard's legitimacy for players, it was in fact full of admissions of failure on Blizzard's part, the implication it clearly conveyed was that these changes would invariably improve if not perfect the raiding experience for players. The final part of the series explained how raiding would change in Warlords of Draenor and the piece finished with the paragraph:

> "The raiding system we're introducing in Warlords draws upon ten years of experience and all of the lessons we've learned along the way. We feel this system will provide the best possible raid experience to as many players as possible, regardless of their play style, and we're excited for you all to try it. We'll be paying close attention to your constructive feedback, and watching carefully once raid testing begins in our upcoming beta"

This paragraph is strangely contradictory, it states that the raiding system in Warlords of Draenor will "provide the best possible raid experience", but would still be carefully scrutinised that seems to strongly suggest the possibility that further improvements would be required. This inconsistency, however, permits the entire notion of design changes in the game, which at the same time as

improving it were always also open to further improvement, thus legitimising change as a default design solution for the game.

Amongst design anthropologists a focal concern has been the relationship between what has been termed the 'messiness' of experience and the idealisation of what design is believed capable of achieving (Dourish and Bell 2011, Pink, Ardèvol and Lanzeni 2016). 'Messiness' describes "things that are unpredictable, lines of contingencies, stories that unfold in ways that were not necessarily expected" (Pink, Ardèvol and Lanzeni 2016; 13). Change presented a consistent and orderly response to the messiness of both player responses to changes and the unexpected outcomes changes often produced. Through the notion of iteration as design practice then 'change' was a means to enact messiness as a form of continuity, and therefore certainty, an accomplishment that has something in common with the understanding of rituals of nationhood described as 'inventions of tradition' by Hobsbawm (1983), a coincidence given further credibility by the symbolic implications of 'major' patch updates and expansions were released that coincided with festive periods when many players had an excess of free time that could be committed to the game and avoided the summer period when players were normally less active. At other times change was conceived in more practical and expedient terms, for example a type of update called a 'hotfix' involved relatively minor changes that could be applied to the server rather than the client located on a player's computer and this could be carried out at any time, even during play.

While change was an essential component in Blizzard's strategies of control and when it was delivered with fanfare and spectacle was eagerly anticipated by players, as it was for new expansion releases, players were not precluded from expressing ambivalence toward it. Greg Street, expressed this concern in a blog post dedicated to the subject of 'change'[19]:

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[19] http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/3435893#blog

"A lot of game design is striking a balance, and I use that term not only to mean making sure that all the various classes are reasonably fair, but also to mean that it's easy to go to one extreme or the other. You even have to strike a balance in how many changes you make. On the one extreme, if you don't change anything, then the game feels stale and players understandably get frustrated that long-standing bugs or game problems aren't addressed. On the other extreme, too much change can produce what we often call the "roller coaster effect," where the game design feels unstable and players, particularly those who play the game more sporadically, can't keep up"

The majority of Street's discussion is given to explaining how Blizzard attempted to employ change so that it would not radically disrupt existing player behaviour on a wider level, while at the same time appeasing the minority of players who were in some way negatively affected by the existing state of the game's design. Street presents himself and the development team as highly receptive to the experiences and views of players and ends the piece by soliciting player input. It's more than evident that when Blizzard communicated directly to players that Blizzard portrayed a version of the organisation that was overtly attentive to the input of players, which was somewhat different to how it was presented in the context of industry events. However, in both contexts change was presented as a process that was ultimately a system for the improvement of the game as a technological means to produce engagement for players and to achieve the goals of the business.

In this respect Blizzard explicitly encountered and exploited the tensions between history – the contingent - and structure – the system of meaning - that the guild members of Helkpo experienced in the form of the 'event' - a moment where the synchrony of structure, the duality of English sociality, coincided with the contingencies of history in the form of *World of Warcraft* (Sahlins 1985). So much of Blizzard's success was attributed to their capacity to 'balance' – whether that was between ease and difficulty, new and old, casual and hardcore – but the term 'balance' suggests synchrony and stability, whereas 'balance' was an ongoing process always at the peripheries of mastery. Blizzard

concealed the messiness of this open-ended process through the illusion of a degree of stability. In the *Savage Mind* Lévi-Strauss famously remarked how what he termed 'cold' societies denied the possibilities of history through acknowledging historical process only as form rather than content (1966). "There is indeed" he explains "a before and after, but their sole significance lies in reflecting each other" (ibid: 235). Without going into too great a level of detail around what is a rather complex argument based around the rejection of the concept of 'totemism', what he means by this is that the relationship between a prior system and its consequences, in the case of totemism the natural world that is used to categorise cultural groups, is not fundamentally changed. 'Fun' in this sense constituted the legitimate grounds of a timeless here and after that remained a constant regardless of change. The game was always already 'fun' and changes to the game were carried out in the name of 'fun' and in an ideal way, would be even more 'fun' not a difference in content, just in form. As Street stated in his address to players - "just remember that our litmus test is usually "Are players having fun?" and not "Are they doing something we didn't expect?"" The unexpected did not fundamentally precipitate change – if it was interpreted as 'fun' it was doing what *World of Warcraft* had already staked out its transcendent quality which as Herzfeld argues is not in any essential way at odds with the procedures of bureaucracy and in fact may underpin its legitimacy (1992) and the work of Goody (1986) and others (e.g. Graeber 2011) demonstrates a direct link between bureaucracy and organised religion, so it should not come as a surprise that change itself was mediated through a form that drew on the ordered and universalised aesthetic that was also found in player produced guides to *World of Warcraft*. The unassuming 'patch notes' that expressed both the grandest and least significant changes to the game were codified, 'non-syntactic' that placed emphasis "not on the more complicated narrative, literary or descriptive uses of language… much further removed from speech, being largely composed of a set of lexemes that are lifted from context" (1986: 94). Every change was produced so as to appear legible and coherent, orderly, simple and most importantly systematic.

5.7. Conclusion

In this chapter the focus was on how the developer, Blizzard, conceptualised its governing role through a series of explorations of the roles of control, certainty and contingency.

The debate was framed by the development and commercial imperatives of Blizzard that emerged over the course of World of Warcraft's development the broad aim of which was to make the relatively cost-efficient 'end-game' content more accessible to the game's wide player-base.

The first account considered the relationship between control and certainty, arguing that the latter is concerned with the predictability of outcomes leaving room for contingency within processes.

From here it looked at a concrete example of this in Blizzard's attempts to 're-code' sociality in the game to eliminate or reduce those elements of social interaction that might discourage players from end-game activities.

The next section explored the relationship Blizzard had with players which acknowledged the way that the empowerment of player-activism was replaced by an aesthetic of player 'power' within the more easily controlled system of the game. It also explored how designers were conceived as observing the dual identity of players in order to reduce forms of contingency a discourse that circled round the incommensurable concept of fun the polysemy of which could be used to legitimate design choices. Finally, it considered the central significance of design change and how this ideological narrative combined the twin concepts of 'structure' and 'history' to generate a contradictory sense of certainty that players would get 'more of the same', but the 'same' would be improved. A sense of continuity was legitimised through the same aesthetic formalisms that player produced resources employed that rendered it a part of a transparent and knowable 'system'.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION: CONTROL IN PROCESS

6.1 Overview of the thesis goals

In the introduction to this thesis I explained that the aim and focus of my study was the examination of control in games that set out to provide an alternative and complimentary perspective to Thomas Malaby's claim that games were "semibound and socially legitimate domains of contrived contingency that [generate] interpretable outcomes" (2007: 96).

World of Warcraft, I claimed, was a site for the emergence of forms of control directed towards the elimination of contingency. And in particular I claimed that these practices of control would be articulated through the concept of the 'bureaucratic imagination' that drew on the genre of quotidian encounters with bureaucracy as a means to accomplish and convey control.

The broader remit I offered was that I intended to use this specific anthropological account as an exemplar for the reconsideration of the role of control in processual anthropologies, and that games might be considered ideal sites for this reappraisal.

Why might this be the case? My definition of control has throughout been relative to its other, contingency. That is, I argued in the introduction that we might consider any site in which contingency is made culturally salient, and therefore classifiable as 'contingency', that the possibility of cultural forms that seek to eliminate, marginalise or reduce it might arise. Games as sites of legitimate contingency, then, present themselves as ideal sites for the cultural production of countervailing forms of control.

My intention then was not to fall into the trap of asserting an epistemological form of determinism imputed by inviolable mechanistic laws, but to understand the relationship between contingency and control as cultural accomplishments that, as with any cultural sets of values, express some kind of relationality.

Control, ironically then, was conceived as a product of a broader historical contingency in which the unfolding of events were unpredictable and indeterminate, but adequately illustrated the very nature of contingency in its capacity to enable the production of cultural forms that, from one perspective, might be seen to contradict its own actuality, but for the fact that contingency itself would be other than that if its outcomes were determinate.

The complex relationship between control and contingency as contrived cultural forms and contingency as an expression of the indeterminate quality of modern life will be considered in greater detail shortly, here however I want to provide an outline of the contents of my conclusion.

I begin with an overview of the arguments presented in each chapter and use them to discuss the ways that control could be accomplished through the legitimacy accorded the game's 'system' and consider how forms designed for contingency may unintentionally create sites for control.

In the second section I consider the way that games may be reconsidered as sites of control through reconsideration of the notions of 'cheating' and what digital games have become in the 21st century.

The third section is devoted to the implications of control in games for processual anthropology considering the relationship between history and structure and performative and prescriptive modes of cultural response to contingent events.

6.2. Overview of the Argument

In chapter 2, 'Control Defined: Problematic Subjects, Transparent Design', the 'game culture' of *World of Warcraft* was explored and analysed in detail. The chapter began by noting how players were framed as fallible and problematic - a characterisation that was contrasted with the game's system which was conceived as transparent and legible. This contrast, conceivable in the form of the classic binary oppositions of structuralism was not a given, nor was it inevitable it must be understood as a cultural accomplishment that had to be reproduced and renegotiated. It was not just that contingency

was located in the agency of players, contingency was coded into the architecture of the game and was in many ways a central mechanic that determined the outcomes of many of the acts of players, it was that players chose to overlook the contingencies of the architecture, to render them less important than the unpredictability of players. At the same time this was not some arbitrary choice collectively adhered to by the social body of those who participated in *World of Warcraft*, it was also the product of several years of changes made to the game's architecture by the developers Blizzard and the productive acts of players who produced a countless volume of online resources about the game. By the time of my fieldwork *World of Warcraft* had left its phase of 'interpretive flexibility' (Pinch and Bijker 2012) and had stabilised into the form that continued to the time of writing in 2016.

While the game's architecture provided a critical set of goals for the actions of players, primarily the advancement of 'characters' (player's avatars) through the successful defeat of enemy encounters and the acquisition of increasingly powerful in-game items, the more pressing matter was how to ensure that players were capable of fulfilling these performative decrees in the 'right' way. The chapter explains the cultural process through which *World of Warcraft* transformed from a site of open-ended experiences associated with the awe and wonder of immersive exploration to a site that was defined by its deterministic systematic qualities. Because players conceived the game's architecture as transparent and therefore knowable, there was an assumption that it could be mastered in performance as long as this knowledge was correctly realised in practice. This raised two issues. Firstly it caused me to question Thomas Malaby's claim that digital games and systems are implicit, that the rules that shape their architecture are concealed from those who engaged them (2013). It also drew attention to the importance of digital games as sites for the production of new forms of knowledge that made new certainties possible. The actual sites where knowledge was generated were external to the game proper and although their importance has often been tangentially acknowledged (e.g. Golub 2010) my focus on the way knowledge was presented and mediated, its aesthetic form, demonstrated the ways in which it legitimised its 'objective' status.

Reproduced across numerous websites – player guides and resources - this knowledge was presented in 'codified' and rationalised form, in the words of Goody (1986). It used language and representation that was 'non-syntactic' that placed emphasis "not on the more complicated narrative, literary or descriptive uses of language… much further removed from speech, being largely composed of a set of lexemes that are lifted from context" (ibid.: 94). It borrowed expressly from a kind of bureaucratic style in which the signs of 'subjectivity' were precluded. This abstract aesthetic then suggested that the information it conveyed was not just representational, but homologous with the game's architecture and that reproducing the knowledge in performance would elicit successful outcomes. The overt use of a de-personalised, bureaucratic aesthetic demonstrates the contrived form in which control could be realised in culture. Within the conceptually rationalised and legible domain of *World of Warcraft,* encounters with contingency were categorised as the performative failure of players, failure that included the absence of knowledge or the inability to perform it correctly. Players fulfilled the role of a *fait accompli* to the legibility granted to the game's architecture.

That the relationship between code and codified knowledge was far more indeterminate than was assumed by players is essential to understanding the modes through which control was expressed. In two sections of this chapter I examine and critique accounts by Golub (2010) and Nardi (2010) that assumed a direct relation between the games 'rules' and the information about the game produced by players, charging them with making the same one-to-one assumptions about this relationship in their analytic endeavours. The belief that the game's architecture was constituted by its transparency legitimised its use as a means to assert control over the actions of others, but the reality was that a substantial gap existed between the code and its representation. A distinction I elucidated to describe this was the difference between 'architectural rules' and 'social rules'. These rule forms were not antithetical - 'social rules' were realised as logical extensions of the 'architectural rules' and they attempted to eliminate the potential for unpredictable action in the spaces where architectural rules provided the most latitude.

As a consequence of this the integrity of 'social rules' were always at risk and performance was the site at which commitment to these rules was most expressly revealed. Here I provided a detailed account of the significance of 'strategy' during raids as the employment of social rules that produced empirical evidence of their absolute relationship to the game's architecture. And it is here I argue for the symmetry of practice and meaning in order to understand control. My account is supported through critique of Suchman's work on plans where she argues that, analytically, plans are *ex post facto* resources used to rationalise accounts of action that were more open-ended in practice (2007). My counter is that, although this may be analytically evident, if we are to understand the function of plans ethnographically we need to allow for the possibility that they are conceived as legitimate determinants of action. The legitimacy of raid strategy depended on its ability to determine the proper performative actions of players and its failure in practice was usually attributed to the inability of players to adhere to its dictates. Success, when it happened, was attributed to a player's understanding and execution of strategy rather than other agentive factors. Here the stakes were particularly high as strategy was taken to be an exemplary form of the isomorphic relation between the game's architecture and the codified player-produced rules.

The final sections of this chapter identified a further site of control that arose in relation to the body. Developing the argument posed by Golub that was concerned with the ways in which *World of Warcraft* players immersed themselves in collective acts of knowledge production, I argue that the multiple sites across which players engaged with the game mitigated against and reduced the possibility for immersion. Drawing on claims that immersion constitutes a form of disembodiment associated with a lack of control (e.g. Stromberg 2009, Schüll 2012) I conclude that *World of Warcraft* did not encourage this kind of immersive property as a normative type of engagement whether within the boundaries of the game or external to it because all the sites that constituted it as the game needed to be utilised to the same extent for competent performance to be possible.

What I hope this chapter demonstrates is how, even under conditions of uncertainty, control could be established as a legitimate motivation for action. This was in no small part on account of the cultural order that emerged from a combination of the more restrictive formal goals of the game and the creative responses of players to those goals. A kind of syllogistic logic prevailed in which the isomorphic relation between the game's architecture and the knowledge produced about it was demonstrated empirically through performance, yet the outcome of successful performance was attributed to the correct application of this knowledge. We might understand this kind of logic as a consequence of any system that relies on self-referentiality to produce enduring meaning. In this measure some forms of action were classified as legitimate performances and others were not; some forms of indeterminacy mattered and some were not granted the same status. Crucially, this sought to check the possibility for performance to alter the relations that constituted the cultural scheme. Players may have routinely encountered the unpredictable through performance but it was comfortably located as 'failure' - a cultural misinterpretation of the system - and as such risk to the system itself was constantly being marginalised.

In Chapter 3 the subject matter was the encounter between the 'game culture' of *World of Warcraft* and English culture. Here it was argued that the game provided a more secure domain for the practice of public friendliness that characterised one half of the dualism of English sociality as described by Daniel Miller (2016). This chapter demonstrated the way that cultural categories could themselves emerge out of and engage the twin urges of control and contingency. The dualism of English sociality was defined by the desire for a clear demarcation of the domains of public and private, a distinct form of orderliness that arose from the separation of these two spheres. Miller explains that English people constructed ways to preserve these boundaries such as the 'home' that marked off a private, autonomous space and public spaces such as 'pubs' were forms of friendliness could be practiced without invoking the private, yet in practice the English were characterised by the anxiety that they would do something or reveal something about themselves in public that was proper to the private domain. In his work on social media, Miller goes on to argue that English people used platforms such

as Facebook and Twitter to calibrate precisely the right degree of social distance and proximity necessary for a comfortable relationship. These social media platforms were an example of the way a digital technology enabled a form of cultural control that made it possible for English people to establish more nuanced boundaries around a complex and fraught cultural scheme that expressed values of central significance for English people.

What *World of Warcraft* made possible for gamers was the prospect of being close and distant at the same time. It achieved this by marginalising the role of the private domain in the public space delineated by the game. In this way it helped resolve a key tension of English culture that was particularly salient for these London gamers which was to maintain a wide array of informal relationships which invariably entailed the exchange of personal information and the equal desire to retain a clear sense of autonomy by not exchanging too much information or information that was considered too personal.

To explain why this was the case I introduced the wider world of these gamers and the expansive social networks that defined the texture of their lives which had a profound effect on the production of boundaries around privacy. For example, very few had what was viewed as conventional family life in the UK, defined, for example, by the private domain of the family home, and although dyadic forms of friendship were common, the complexities of being part of a wide network meant that supra-dyadic relationships were just as predominant and people's networks were characterised by a large number of weak social ties. The result of this was that on the one hand an individual probably 'knew' a considerable number of people but they didn't necessarily know a great deal about them. As far as English sociality was concerned this was often a good thing, the problem was that within wide networks this kind of partial information could be problematic and potentially productive of the social embarrassment and awkwardness that was of deep concern to English people - information of a potentially private nature could enter more public domains.

Applying the term commonly used to describe relationships - 'knowing' - I characterised this as a partial and indeterminate form of knowledge in relationships that held an ambivalent status because it enabled social distance but also produced uncertainty about the motives of others. The problem was that seeking to access these motives required the production of intimacy through the exchange of personal information that threatened an individual's sense of autonomy. The uncertainty attributed to others was further complicated by the practice of genres of communication used in public domains that specifically functioned to reveal little personal information. Because the lives of these London gamers were so deeply enmeshed within their networks, the general problems posed by these tensions were exacerbated.

Drawing on the work of Simmel I argued that it was quite normal for relationships to be constituted by both intimacy and distance, revelation and concealment, disclosure and secrecy (1950), but as Simmel stated that did not make concealment any less of a concern. This pertained even for close friendships, where the tensions were in some respects even greater given the conflicting forces of intimacy and autonomy. In response to this I dedicated some time to critiquing the literature on friendship that asserted an association between autonomy and sentiment, suggesting that in English culture these concepts were better considered as a tension that existed in friendship. Social networks then were critical sites of uncertainty that enabled a certain degree of control over articulations of privacy, but at the same time were complex enough that anxiety about the movement of private information was not entirely controllable whether it was being circulated or withheld. As such I argued that within networks personal information could become unshackled from individuals and appear to take on a life of its own. The consequence of this is that sometimes people could become lost in the network.

The remainder of the chapter provided a detailed examination of how *World of Warcraft* enabled gamers to overcome this tension and effectively assert control over how personal information was used. One of the key conceits was the distinction between 'player' and 'person'. In passing the

threshold of the game people were reframed as 'players' and effectively became different types of subjects. This shift in status was legitimised by the architectural rules and norms and dispositions were expected to alter in accordance with the goals attributed to the game that constituted a more finite and knowable domain.

One of the principle ways in which this change in status was affected was through the exercise of accountability. Within the informal relations of networks accountability was often conceived as a threat to autonomy because it might require the disclosure of personal information and made the acts of an individual beholden to others. In the absence of accountability trust prevailed. Trust mediated the potentially contradictory qualities of autonomy and dependence in relationships and maintained relations in the absence of the exchange of explicit information. Trust was precarious and risky however and people often expressed doubts and insecurities about its primacy in relationships. *World of Warcraft* legitimised accountability by restricting the focus of attention on matters deemed integral to the game and it therefore held *players* accountable not the *person*. This made possible discussions about individual behaviour that would otherwise have induced extreme discomfort – such as the explicit assessment of an individual's abilities or whether a connection counted as a 'real' friend.

The kind of accountability that was practiced sought to delineate the 'person-al' from the player rendering the latter a more legible and transparent entity and this contrasted with the partial and indeterminate form of 'knowing'. In essence it stripped away personal and private information as not just unnecessary for performance within the game but as a potential threat to performance. The phenomenon of 'drama' was for English gamers a source of anxiety not just because it could cause damage to the guild, but because the damage it could inflict stemmed from the embarrassing revelation of personal feelings. Accountability worked because the social rules of the game existed to preclude and marginalise the private. An individual could maintain their autonomy outside the game, but once within the game they were expected to account for their actions if required to do so and this became especially important if they were participating in collective activities.

The status of *World of Warcraft* as a 'game' was itself used as a resource to excoriate the personal. It was 'just a game', players were repeatedly told, a strategy that was not so much an attempt to reduce the stakes manifest in the game, but to emphasise how in the domain of a game those stakes were put at risk by the presence of private information.

In becoming a player an individual became a part of the game and was apprehended as features of its architecture. This was most evident in what I described as 'mechanographic' accounts. While an individual player might be asked to render an account of their self, *World of Warcraft*'s architecture also produced its own forensic trail of accountability. Unlike 'autographic' accounts, these were held to be of a more objective quality because they were generated by the system and would not therefore be subject to the fallible reports players were thought to produce. The faith players had in the system stemmed from its status as transparent and legible and therefore the knowledge it produced was viewed as more authorially valid.

More so than in the 'game culture' of *World of Warcraft* its intersection with English culture produced a key site for the engagement of control that was not viewed as having a profound effect on the autonomy of an individual external to the game. This was principally because outside of the game an individual was not a 'player', the latter was just a temporary role that prevailed as long as one engaged with the game and this meant that accountability only extended as far as an individual's commitment to the game. In this way it appeared to be a perfect architecture of Englishness. I described this commensurate coincidence of technological and cultural forms using Sahlins' notion of the 'event', a moment where the synchrony of structure - the systems of cultural meaning - coincided with the contingencies of history (1985).

History and structure as we've seen are often posited as opposing forces, the former affecting change upon the latter, the latter striving to perdure in the face of the former, yet in this meeting of *World of Warcraft* and Englishness the unpredictable outcome was one that affirmed the cultural system of the

other, history in this instance, rather than altering them in a way that risked the systemic coherence of relations legitimised their meaningfulness.

This chapter described how control, legitimised through the architecture of the game, could be extended into existing cultural categories where control in some sense was desirable but highly precarious. A form of control was expressed through social distance but enacting social distance also risked a loss of control. Social distance enabled autonomy but it could weaken relationships, it established a local form of control at the expense of a more dispersed form of control. To a significant extent the compelling nature of *World of Warcraft* for these London gamers arose from the more formalised relationships it could establish. Within the networks any attempt to establish rules would have been viewed as a severe and offensive constraint on autonomy. There was no credible way to legitimise this kind of accountability. That the architecture of *World of Warcraft* was conceived as a legible set of rules established a baseline from which new forms of knowledge produced by both social rules and coded architecture could encompass subjects and while it did not entirely preclude conventional forms of 'knowing' this kind of partial knowledge could be justifiably challenged and marginalised in favour of more rigorous forms of knowing.

In Chapter 4 I turned my attention the fantasy genre. This is a subject matter that, given the prevalence of the genre in MMOs and videogames more generally, was surprisingly overlooked. The reason for this was no doubt attributable of the relative unimportance it seemed to assume for players of these games, particularly *World of Warcraft*. However, in the private domains of London gamers the genre assumed much more significance. I made the claim that the historic and material trajectory of the genre was implicated in the production of autonomy in English culture, a process that I traced back to the emergence of discrete fantasy worlds for children and associated solitary play and the trends that arose from the genre in the wake of the revival of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books in the late 1960s.

I developed my position further, suggesting that contra the claims made in studies of 'modern enchantment' that the experience of the latter was exceptional, that, certainly for these London gamers, it was fairly quotidian and mundane. By contrast, engagements with the rational were notably less common. The historic and cultural entanglements of fantasy and the private domain and the genre's countless volumes of ever-expanding fantasy settings that rendered it an 'unreachable frontier' (Crapanzano 2004) meant that within social public domains it had the potential to cause social awkwardness in part because of the obscure and therefore 'geeky' knowledge it invariably produced.

The knowledge produced by the fantasy genre was always in some way incomplete, there was always something more that could be added to it or some element that proved elusive. This was evidently quite the opposite of the legible and finite knowledge attributed to *World of Warcraft*'s architecture. In this respect the fact that the developers of the game decided to take the game in a direction that made this kind of knowledge possible, while to some degree diminishing the role of the fantasy genre was significant. What it meant in practice was that to engage and commit to the game did not necessitate the acquisition of obscure knowledge that could be construed as 'geeky'. By restricting the role of obscure information, it opened up the possibility for collective engagements with rationalised forms of knowledge that, at least in theory, could be comprehended by anyone and applied performatively in practice.

With reference to Appadurai's differentiation of fantasy as autotelic and individualistic and the imagination as collective and action-oriented (1996) I claimed that fantasy was often not viewed as especially imaginative and was often described as predictable and clichéd. This differed fundamentally from the novel encounter of a rationalised system that exhibited the potential for application. I suggested that in some cases fantasy could inspire forms of collective action but within *World of*

Warcraft where visibility was accorded value, the acts of concealment and obscurity necessary to produce enchantment operated against it being valued in these terms.

One of the purposes of this chapter was to challenge the literature on modern enchantment in order to 'reclaim' the rational not as an all-encompassing iron cage that regulated day to day life, but to demonstrate how the idea of a form of rationalised control was uncommon and in that respect marginal and that as such it presented itself as something novel. It was this factor that inspired the imagination of players. This 'objective' knowledge promised hope and successful outcomes and collectively it made raiding possible by transcending the individual perspectives of players.

The final chapter explored how control was manifest in the governing practices of *World of Warcraft*'s developers, Blizzard. In the opening section of the chapter I explained how the changing design of the game reflected the company's desire to make previously exclusive end-game content accessible to as many players as possible to maintain subscriptions to the game and that this resulted in a tension between the status attributed to end-game content and its accessibility, that it had to retain its symbolic capital despite being something that theoretically a player of any level of competence might complete. This issue I argued framed the governing practices of Blizzard.

I then went on to argue that in contrast with Linden Lab's *Second Life* platform where the developers expressed interest in the outcomes of complex systems, Blizzard were more interested in the system itself and how the unpredictable activities of players could be incorporated into the system. This was illustrated by successive design features added to the game that sought to re-code sociality by removing processes by which groups were created and in-game items distributed and handing it over to the game. This reduced the possibility for behaviour by players that Blizzard viewed as detrimental to the activities they wished players to participate in, but importantly it also moved agency to a system that as far as players were concerned was incapable of demonstrating the fallibilities attributed to players.

I then considered the issue of the relations of power between Blizzard and the game's players. Although Blizzard claimed to listen to players, provided proprietary spaces where players could voice their views and sometimes responded directly to these views, it was always on Blizzard's terms and the process by which a decision to respond or not was opaque and closed off to players. I then looked at two examples of how Blizzard appropriated player power into their own schemes. Firstly, how 'power' for players was constructed in aesthetic terms as a principle of game design in which no matter how powerful players felt within the game world they did not have any power in terms of the relation with Blizzard. Secondly I examine the way that the design team for the game were also granted sovereignty as 'players' and used this knowledge to make design decisions that related to ambiguous and non-measurable concepts such as fun. By reducing 'players' to a homogenous group Blizzard removed any potential power of specific individuals or groups of players.

Then in the final section I explored the way that Blizzard strove to create a sense of stability and certainty despite the regular changes made to the game's design. They did this through an ideological discourse that proposed that change was always in the service of delivering more of the same. The 'more' in this expression was not supposed to relate to quantity exclusively but also 'quality'. That is, each design change was a step toward a better game, a game that delivered more 'fun' for players. Like the 'cold' societies described by Lévi-Strauss (1966), Blizzard sought to incorporate change into the existing relations of order that constituted the game. In this way I suggested that Blizzard sought to control the contingencies of history itself.

Throughout my thesis the lynchpin around which control and contingency revolved was the belief that *World of Warcraft*'s architecture could in some way be rendered as a transparent system which legitimised claims to control and determined the contingent nature of those things that were classified as other than the system. Constructed in this way the system provoked commitment both performatively and in terms of the value with which it was held. This idea of the system and the order it contained inspired gamers to think differently about their actions and the relationships they had

with others. As Chapters 3 and 4 made clear, modernity for these people was not typically characterised by the orderly or the rationalised, yet within the domain of *World of Warcraft* it made possible genuinely novel and inspiring acts that in some cases transgressed normative boundaries.

I used the term the 'bureaucratic imagination' as a way to describe the practices of control that were accomplished through the system and, in the traditions of bureaucracy, the system was conceived as something that endured even when subject to change and that expressed a form of indifference that was fundamental to the legitimation of claims within the context of a game. It also generated knowledge the aesthetics of which were rendered in the likeness of bureaucratic documents - formal, non-syntactical, objective statements expunged of signifiers of subjective authorship.

6.3. Control in Games: Beyond Cheating

One of the notions around which concepts of control were generated by players was visibility. The most prominent example of this was the copious volume of player-produced guides for *World of Warcraft*. This information was seen to make the workings of the game transparent and was made visible through its public presence on the internet and promised a kind of 'formula' for mastery of the game. While it is easy to mistake this material as marginal or peripheral to the software artifact that constituted the game, I hope I have shown that it was in fact critical in shaping the kind of game *World of Warcraft* became.

Although the volume of material produced for *World of Warcraft* over its almost twelve year history, at the time of writing, was considerable, the actual practices of producing these kinds of guides was not new or unique to this game. It is routine today for online guides, walkthroughs, wikis and other player resources to follow hot on the heels of most major videogame releases, furnishing players with a set of materials to help them master the game.

Not surprisingly, this kind of material and its associated practices has drawn the interest of academics who are interested in what it means for games and gameplay, how it has shaped gamer identities and

asymmetries, who produces it and the relationship its producers have with the industries that make the games and those that have emerged at their peripheries. One of the most significant areas of debate concerned with this material is the concept of 'cheating', of which perhaps the most comprehensive work is that of Mia Consalvo (2007).

In her work on 'cheating' Consalvo defines the term 'paratext' to describe the supplementary materials that emerged around the videogames industry such as magazines, adverts, blog posts, reviews as well as guides, walkthroughs and cheat codes. She stresses that, far from being peripheral materials, they actually shape the way a game is experienced and played (2007: 8-9) and that these kinds of materials have become an increasingly normative component of videogame release and practice. But, as she notes, not all these resources are necessarily granted the same legitimacy by all players, some are considered to be cheating and some are not. At the same time cheating is a contested concept – 'cheating' is for some players a legitimate use of a game's resources, even if those resources are produced externally to the game or are produced by players rather than by the game's developers.

While debate around what does and does not constitute cheating in games remains fertile ground for discussion, my intention here is to consider cheating in relation to control. While Consalvo defines cheating broadly as 'unfair advantage over other players' what happens when the kinds of resources she refers to as paratexts become legitimate parts of the game and what does this mean for the concept of mastery? Guides and walkthroughs may have affected how engagement with a game was conceived but they also transformed conceptions of performance and mastery in games from activity that had to be achieved through the open-ended process of trial and error and the invariable experience of failure to an activity which, through the employment of an external knowledge source, became significantly less open-ended. In one sense this might be viewed as closing down the improvisational possibilities a game system offered but this does not fundamentally make it any less legitimate.

Visibility is a common trope in the discourses of control in modernity. It is the principle around which Foucault's disciplinary mechanisms are articulated, where surveillance constituted an internalised mode of subjectivity (1977). James Scott's critique of the practices of modern states hinges on the techniques they employed to make people and territory visible through a schematic process of simplification that produced a legible and universalised representation convenient for state management (1998). The argument is that the ocular practices of states such as maps and censuses, CCTV and drones, satellites and night vision goggles (Robben 2013) asymmetries that are advantageous for the realisation of state authority. It is the one-sided nature of the visual that enables control because it renders the observed in an inferior position of power – their actions are observed but the observers are invisible. The other side of the coin for modernist conceptions of control that operates the other way is that of transparency, that the realisation of democracy is envisioned in the visibility of state practices allowing electorates to make more informed decisions about who should be in power and how power is practiced.

While analyses of state control through visibility are often critical of the successes of these mechanisms of control, it is evident that for games the increasing normativity of materials which promise performative mastery are of a different character. The surveilling techniques of states are often vocally criticised by groups that position themselves as defenders of human freedoms and by academics that question their ethics and their efficacy, states continue to legitimise the use of these modes of control and indeed, with the development of new technologies, now employ even more sophisticated tools to achieve such. In the same way that bureaucratic forms of representation and ethics of impersonalism and indifference were conceived as mechanisms to achieve instrumental goals in *World of Warcraft,* might we also imagine the appeal of visibility as a key metaphor for mastery in gaming systems?

The fact is that games and gamers are becoming more visible. Gamers became visible to each other within games through the growth of multiplayer games in the first decade of the 21st century and in

this decade gamers have become visible outside specific games through meta-platforms such as Steam and Xbox 'gamertag' profiles and significantly Twitch that allows players to stream their gameplay sessions moving activities that were once almost exclusively private to a highly public space.

While this shift in gaming norms does not render questions around cheating null, it should give us pause to re-consider how gaming and forms of control might be reconsidered. In the early ethnographic studies of MMOs a distinction was drawn between 'power gamers' and the more typical 'casual' gamer and significant attention was focussed on how the former challenged the boundaries of work and play through their extreme commitment to the game (Taylor 2006a). At the same time casual players might view the practices of power gamers as in some sense cheating or at least not observing the appropriate rules, which often employed paratextual materials and practices (e.g. Lin and Sun 2010). Yet even as early as 2006 Taylor was questioning the value of this distinction in *World of Warcraft* and as categories relevant to videogames more generally (2006b).

In Paul's account of the introduction into *World of Warcraft* of what were termed 'welfare epics' in 2007 (2010) the distinctions he draws between players are described in terms of the activities they participated in – in this case 'raiders' and 'PvPers'- rather than between 'power gamers' and 'casuals'. Although the 'welfare epics' in question were framed as a reflection of the lesser status of PvP from Blizzard's perspective, Paul shows how PvP players were able to articulate their position in terms of the same or even greater levels of mastery then raiders. In Silverman and Simon's paper on Dragon Kill Points they also acknowledge that classification of gamers might be better expressed through activity rather than status (2009). In these papers then there is a shift from a vertical relationship between players to a more horizontal form in which different activities are legitimate in their own terms.

At the point I began my study the use of paratextual resources was entirely normative regardless of what in-game activities players participated in and there was no sense of these acts as constituting cheating or providing an unfair advantage in any sense of the term. Quite the opposite prevailed, these

paratexts were an essential component of engagement. This did not preclude forms of cheating – Blizzard still ruled that some mods were too 'invasive' and 'gold selling' remained questionable, but in many cases, particularly in terms of 'mods' these forms of 'cheating' were seen to provide an unfair advantage in terms of mastery of the game, not an unfair advantage against other players.

To end this section I want to consider Salen and Zimmerman's account of player types in their 2004 book *Rules of Play* (2004) as a means of drawing attention to the 'culture of games' (Boellstorff 2006) has changed in the past decade and the implications of this for control. Salen and Zimmerman identify five player types: the 'standard player' who is 'honest' and plays the game as it was "intended to be played"; the 'dedicated player' who "studies the formal systems of the game" in order to master them; the 'unsportsmanlike player' who follows the rules of the game but does so in a way that "violates the spirit of the lusory attitude"; the 'cheat' who violates the formal rules to win; and the 'spoilsport' who doesn't really play the game at all (2004).

The understanding of games Salen and Zimmerman employ to generate these 'types' is shaped by their understanding of games as closed off from the world by a 'magic circle' generated to preserve the rules as they were intended by the designers, which as I have argued in this thesis is not necessarily how 'rules' operate, but this aside their types are interesting because they might be viewed as the product not just of a particular theoretical conception of what a game is, but also of their historic period. In *World of Warcraft* the 'standard player' was expected to follow the rules as intended by the game's culture not just as it was intended by the designers and was expected to have 'studied' the formal system to some extent. That is, by following the rules as intended all players were expected to demonstrate some dedication and a minimum of mastery of the formal system if not its performative actuality.

We might put it in these terms: whereas once the actions of the 'standard player' were controlled by the game, now the actions of the standard player are expected to demonstrate control over the game.

6.4. Control in Processual Anthropology

The previous discussion was concerned with the relationship between players and the game systems they engaged and the new forms of control they conceived through the increased visibility accorded to these systems. In this section I want to consider the broader ramifications of games as sites for the generation and imagination of control and how this might fit within the frames of understanding employed in processual anthropologies.

If, generally speaking, processual and practice based anthropologies are concerned with the non-deterministic relationship between cultural systems and the actions of people (Ortner 1984: 146) and the open-endedness of this process, where does control fit in here, if it is not the exclusive privilege of those in positions of power?

In processual anthropologies, cultural systems are reproduced through practice, but often the implication is that this is not necessarily a conscious outcome even if it is presented as the product of agency, as expressed in Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (1977). This tendency is mitigated somewhat by Sahlins' insistence on the 'pragmatic' value of systems (1985: ix) - their employment in practice that expresses the desire to reproduce these values through acts that affirm them. At the same time, as we have seen, Sahlins admits that "in action [cultural] meanings are always at risk" (ibid) and thus in action a system's state is always under threat. While my discussion of Sahlins has tended to focus on this cultural mode because it was relevant to performance within the system that constituted *World of Warcraft*'s culture, I have only briefly referred to the other mode of cultural reproduction that he describes as 'prescriptive structures' that "assimilate the circumstances to themselves by a kind of denial of their contingent or evenemential character" (ibid: xii). My intention is to give this more 'controlling' mode of culture more attention here and to clarify better its relation with the 'performative mode'.

Sahlins describes the prescriptive mode of culture as one in which "nothing is new, or at least happenings are valued for their similarity to the system as constituted" (1985: xii). He acknowledges

the similarities between this mode and Lévi-Strauss's concept of 'cold societies', but then develops the concept further suggesting that as 'ideal types' we may characterise a given culture as one or the other, but in reality both can be found in the same society. Having stated this he chooses not to explore this concept any further, but the value of this notion for an understanding of control in processual anthropology should be evident. Sahlins suggests that "a given society will have certain strategic sites of historical action… hot areas, and other areas relatively closed" (ibid: xiii), so in one respect a processual anthropology concerned with control and contingency might focus its attention on the identification and differentiation of these sites. An alternative and perhaps more forthright processual anthropology might view these modes themselves as particular responses to historical contingency that are not definitively related to specific cultural sites but are employed in response to the particular nature of the contingencies that confront them.

Before I consider how this might enable us to make sense of games, or indeed any systems, as sites characterised by control and contingency, I want to briefly consider how Sahlins defines the performative structures of Hawaiian culture (1985) and then compare it to Janet Carsten's processual account of the culture she encountered in the Malaysian fishing village Langkawi (1997) in order to analyse the relationship between performance and prescription in more granular and empirical detail.

If the default assumption of anthropologists is that *a priori* relational categories prescribe behaviour, Sahlins states that in Hawaiian culture people 'made up the rules' – that is relationships were made out of practice, that kin were made as well as born. While Sahlins account focuses on the way in which sexual relations constituted society including those instigated by Hawaiian women towards colonial men and the complicity of men as a means to attain the divine, a process that performatively constituted the sacredness of both parties (and then undid it), I want to consider his account of 'feeding' because it has such close parallels with that described by Carsten for the Langkawi villagers production of kinship.

'Feeding' or *hānai*, also called adoption "may as effectively institute parenthood as birth" Sahlins

explains (1985: 27). The term *Kama'āina* means children of the land and refers to the state of being

'native' to a place. Yet, again, the status of 'native' may be born of action as well as birthright. The

consistency Sahlins attributes to these qualities is their invocation of common substance: "parents

and children are people of the same kind: they are composed of the same thing, whether by the

reproduction of substance or its common consumption" (ibid: 29). Food that comes from the land,

makes those who eat it children of the land.

Compare this to Carsten's ethnography, which is perhaps one of the most distinctly processual

anthropologies produced on the subject of kinship. Her account of 'processual kinship' describes a

similar course in her ethnography of a Malay fishing village by which non-biologically related

individuals are transformed into kin through acts of incorporation (1997). She notes that identity

exhibited a great deal of fluidity and that, although many of the villagers were of migrant origin,

through participation in the collective activities of the village they became natives. This was not a

temporary or conditional state, but an absolute identity. Kinship in Langkawi was focused on the

future and the production of grandchildren and combined with the incorporative processes including

the sharing of food and hearth that transformed outsiders into villagers and kin, this contributed to a

culture that sought to obliterate the past, which was actively 'forgotten'. So far the similarities with

Sahlins' account of the performative enaction of culture he attributes to Hawaiians and Carsten's

account of incorporation are quite evident, yet Carsten recounts further experiences that should cause

us to reconsider what we mean when we think about the relationship between performative and

prescriptive modes of culture.

What Carsten became conscious of during her fieldwork and her incorporation into the village and kin

of the family she lived with was that this was a process that entailed control – what she termed

'coercive incorporation' (1997: 256) in which "the process of integrating new migrants is obligatory.

In the ideal image the newcomer's welcome is forceful: he is shown such overwhelming hospitality

that there is no choice but to submit" (ibid: 270). Describing the process of incorporation she experienced herself, Carsten explains how she felt as though she was being "taken over and controlled" (ibid: 275), how her behaviour, dress, appearance and demeanour were subject to coercive transformation. The house in the Langkawi village was the key site for this that kept the "divisive and threatening aspects of the external world at bay" (ibid).

Carsten's account is so interesting because it demonstrates how the performative mode highlighted throughout Carsten's ethnography switches to a prescriptive form. It's as though once the cultural category of kin or sibling is established in Langkawi people assert an alternative system which seeks to stabilise the category produced. One way in which we might understand this is that the status of individuals is fluid outside of the prescriptive system, but once an individual was incorporated they were then under obligation to respect that new status and their behaviour expected to conform to the normative expectations of that status.

Carsten's account actually seems to suggest that this coercive process began even before she was fully incorporated, control was as much a tool of her incorporation as the exchange of substances that comprises the main subject of her discussion. We might read similar motives of control, at both a cultural and an individual level for the Hawaiian women who established sexual relations with colonial men, whose intention it was to produce the cultural category of the divine. Sahlins' broader thesis concerning the cultural logic that resulted in Cook's death at the hands of Hawaiians concerns the same prescriptive acts that were if not inevitable at least coherent within the prescribed categories of Hawaiian culture (1985).

A similar mediation between performative and prescriptive modes was evident in English friendship where the act of making friends was highly open-ended but once established the status persisted in some sense until it was actively rendered null by one party. Friendship as a cultural category assumed certain expectations but it still remained relatively performative but this was largely because the norms of English social distance were treated as a more significant prescriptive cultural category.

These studies evince the kind of strategizing Bourdieu describes in relations of gift exchange where habitus does not determine the strategies that individuals perform, but does shape the values that inform their actions and the legitimacy of the actions they take (1977). That Bourdieu occasionally uses the term 'game' to describe the role of strategy in exchange (ibid: 11-12) is not entirely surprising. Strategy speaks of the processual and unpredictable acts participants undertake to, in this case, acquire and produce symbolic capital.

Culture appears to be performative for activities and events that are not yet culturally determined, that are as cultural categories indeterminate, yet once incorporated into a system of categories and relations culture is susceptible to a prescriptive mode in which people, or at least those invested in the values the system represents, may assume a more controlling disposition through recourse to the expectations a category entails. In this sense control may be relative to the extent of such expectations, English friendship necessitated few and therefore was largely open-ended and performative, kin status in Langkawi demanded more of the individual and was therefore subject to greater coercive practices. As Captain Cook discovered, the status of Lono, god of natural growth and human reproduction, carried its own fatal expectations.

What does this mean for games? I want to present two ways of thinking about games as systems that at the same time as producing an analogy with culture in the performative and the prescriptive modes, also ask that we think about them as more explicit, more contrived and self-contained cultural forms.

The first is to think about systems that are specifically designed to be open-ended, that is to produce the unexpected. This kind of system is designed less with the intention of sustaining and reproducing itself, but with producing conditions that could not be predicted from the outset. Linden Lab's *Second Life* platform may well constitute one of the most well known examples of this because of the degree of creative authorship the developers provided for its users. The system here is almost of secondary importance compared to what it makes possible, which is effectively almost anything.

A system such as *Minecraft* that provides its users with similar creative tools also falls into this category and we might also see some examples of gambling as conforming to this model, principally because the effects of the loss or acquisition of money may have unanticipated effects on those that play them. These games produce and enable a kind of performative culture where systems of relations and values may emerge out of these practices. For example, as open-ended as *Second Life* was, norms of activity and appearance were certainly manifest.

The second is to think about systems as simply re-producing themselves. Whereas contingency in the former is the product of the system, here contingency is conceived as part of the system. A simple example of this kind of system is the game 'noughts and crosses' or 'tic tac toe' which is made up of an extremely finite range of possibilities that incorporates contingency but, given the constraints of the system and the limited set of possibilities it offers, is a form contingency that may quickly become exhausted or even eliminated entirely.

In both systems, contingency is present but in the first case it is probably a more significant quality than in the latter. The point is that a system, a game, may be designed as a means to marginalise or at the very least control its own inherent contingencies entirely or relatively speaking. This was more or less the course Blizzard set for *World of Warcraft* from around 2008 onwards. They contrived a 'levelling' process that was increasingly simplified so that it was not a question of 'if' but 'when' a player would reach maximum level, followed by a set of 'endgame' encounters that at some difficulty level the majority of players were expected to defeat. The content of the system was always finite, even when new content was added and the term 'content' itself alludes to the game as a container of a limited amount of matter.

Significantly these prescriptive features of the game were taken seriously by the majority of players, who conceived them as constitutive of highly prescriptive categories and set about enforcing these expectations. In this way control was a result of process and process the negotiated means by which prescriptive forms of control were conceived.

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