

RUNNING WITH NEWBIES:  
UNDERSTANDING ONLINE COMMUNITIES  
THROUGH THE EYES OF SECOND-GENERATION GAMERS

by

Shawna Kathleen Kelly

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Shawna Kathleen Kelly

## **Dedication**

To my family who encouraged and supported me throughout this process, especially to my father, whose wisdom helped me through the tough times, and to my mother, who was always ready to fight battles at my side. To Elizabeth McPartland, Jeff Allen, Jim Yoder, Jason Bowen, Anthony Ellisor, Chad Weber, David Alicea, Rob Liddell, M. Hammam Alsafrjalani and all of the friends and colleagues who encouraged me. Thank you for knowing when to give me space and when to make me get out of my head.

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## Abstract

The growing popularity of video games is introducing a new generation of video game players to online communities and the communicative behaviors of these second-generation gamers open new ways to understand the social impacts of interactive entertainment. This dissertation examines how second-generation gamers offer insights into dispositions, identity performance, community membership, and video game addiction. Ethnographic research of players entering the online gaming community of World of Warcraft suggests that second-generation gamers are neither “hardcore” nor “casual” players, but have developed a different disposition from those described by previous games researchers. The five key attributes of the second-generation gaming disposition are that they are ease-of-use oriented, embody diversity, thrive on consistency, learn only what is necessary and rely on proven solutions. Second-generation gamers are also more likely to fall outside of the “typical gamer” stereotype in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. They respond to the dominant gamer culture by making performance decisions for both their personal and social identities. After entering the online community, second-generation gamers must decide how to present themselves to other players and learn their role in the community. For some second-generation players, online interactions with other players and with the gaming community take on a deeply meaningful role in their everyday lives. Lastly, in response to the popular discourse of video game addiction, second-generation players develop play-limiting strategies which suggest that “addiction” is not a useful framework for understanding their motivations for playing video games.

## **Introduction**

This dissertation documents an exploration of the continuing social impact of online communication through examining the everyday practices of people who play online digital games for entertainment. Throughout the dissertation, digital games are used to demonstrate how media consumers interact with each other through online communication technologies. The chapters focus on four key areas: learned behavior, personal and social identity performance, and user “addiction.” The data was collected from interviews with players of the popular online digital game, World of Warcraft, about the social behaviors of “hardcore” and “casual” digital game players. The players’ stories, related within, are meant to help understand how individuals wrestle with the role technology takes in their lives and to give deeper insight into current and future directions for communication technologies.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation is being submitted as partial fulfillment of a Doctorate of Philosophy in Communication from the University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Through the lens of Communication, this dissertation connects research trajectories from Media Studies, Performance Studies, online communities research, and Game Studies in order to better understand the social impact of online communication. The mixed methods used throughout were collected from the work of previous scholars in sociology, anthropology, performance studies, and communication, and where specifically combined for this project. This section will

outline the methodological decisions that were made regarding locating the research in World of Warcraft, choosing appropriate subjects and collecting useful data.

**Online games as a space for inquiry.**

People choosing to interact with technologies for entertainment purposes are often playful – willing to explore and try new things. Entertainment is often a social activity with friends and family either sharing or discussing media such as movies, music, or games. Digital games offer a useful medium for exploring online communication because of their history, popularity, ability to develop community, and the insights offered through their technical affordances.

In terms of history, arcade games entered popular culture almost sixty years ago, and video games and text-based multi-user domains have provided some of the earliest forms of popular entertainment available through networked communication (Malliet & de Meyer, 2005). In the early 2000s, digital games became even more popular as entertainment, including games for dedicated consoles like the Sony Playstation series, Microsoft X-Box series or Nintendo’s GameCube and Wii consoles, or computer-based games for PCs and Macs. McGonigal (2011), compiled statistics from a number of sources to talk about the growth of the digital game phenomenon:

“In the United States alone, there are 183 million *active gamers* (individuals who, in surveys, report that they play computer or video games ‘regularly’ – on average, thirteen hours a week). Globally, the online gamer community – including console, PC, and mobile phone gaming – counts more than 4 million gamers in the Middle East, 10

million in Russia, 105 million in India, 10 million in Vietnam, 10 million in Mexico, 13 million in Central and South America, 15 million in Australia, 17 million in South Korea, 100 million in Europe, and 200 million in China” (p. 3).

In addition to the numbers of players, people sometimes play digital games for hours at a time while chatting and interacting with other players. This can lead to players becoming invested in an identifiable community with distinct patterns of behavior and an active social component. Rheingold (1993) described this community culture formation as “...a kind of speeded-up social evolution” (p. xvi). The culture of each digital game and of digital games as a whole offers rich data for social theorists to study.

Lastly, by being a mediating technology, the technical affordances of digital games both encourage and limit social interaction. For example, the visual component of avatars adds to a sense of social interaction in online spaces while still maintaining a sense of anonymity. The predominance of text-based communication is another technical affordance, although one that is shifting as VoIP (Voice over IP) software, which allows players to speak and hear one another, has become more accessible and is creating new online communicative norms. The mediated communication available through the technological affordances of online games, as well as the history, popularity and strength of community within digital games make them a valuable site in which to base research on the social impact of Internet technologies.

### **World of Warcraft as a representative online game.**

This dissertation focuses on World of Warcraft, a massively multiplayer online digital game (MMO), as a case study for examining social online communication behaviors. World of Warcraft is a popular game with a well-developed game culture. McGonigal (2011) noted that World of Warcraft fans "...are so intent on mastering the challenges of their favorite game that, collectively, they've written a quarter of a million wiki articles on the WoWWiki – creating the single largest wiki after Wikipedia" (p. 2). While the active player community makes World of Warcraft an enticing object of study, the game is also the most popular MMO in the history of the genre. Following its release in late 2004, World of Warcraft received a larger number of subscriptions than was anticipated. In Castronova's (2005) book, he noted that "Blizzard's World of Warcraft broke single-day PC game sales records at its release on November 23, 2004. As this book goes to press, it is on target to reach several hundred thousand subscribers" (p. 134). After this successful release, Blizzard Entertainment continued to refine the game, especially the initial interactions that players experienced during entry to the game, and included incentives for people who might not normally play an MMO to try the game. By 2010, when the data collection for this project had been completed, Blizzard Entertainment announced that they had 12 million World of Warcraft subscribers worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010c). Although Castronova was only estimating the potential popularity of the game, his guess actually suggests the number of gamers who would be likely to play a game like this—the first-generation gamers who are deeply immersed in gamer culture. When compared to the total number of players, even if

“several hundred thousand” is interpreted as 400,000 players, that number of first-generation players is less than 5% of the whole. This begs the question: Who are the other 95%? These “newbie” second-generation gamers are a strong presence within World of Warcraft, making this particular game an excellent space within which to examine this understudied group of players.

### **Data Collection**

In this dissertation, I used ethnographic data-collection tools and relied on research findings from several academic disciplines including Communication, Cultural Studies, Performance Studies, Education, and Game Studies. In referencing other academic work, I strove to make connections between the setting, subjects, or methodology of the research and my own study.

Data for this paper was collected utilizing online ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews. An online digital game like World of Warcraft emphasizes participation, meaning that the ethnographer cannot simply sit in a corner and observe activities, but must actively participate with the group performing the activities. In practice, the researcher has to become proficient enough at the game to be asked to participate in the complicated behaviors she is trying to study. The emphasis on participation in digital games has made ethnographers wrestle with what it means to be observing, recording and analyzing social behaviors at the same time that the researcher is also engaging in the behaviors. Nardi (2010) comments that “it would be impossible to penetrate the game without becoming engaged as a player” (p. 28). Pearce (2009) frames her ethnographic research in a game space as “participant engagement.” So, like a

traditional ethnographic observation, becoming a legitimate member of the space requires hours of immersion.

Another methodological consideration is that player behaviors are shaped in response to the game design of an MMO, which is not static. Taylor notes that, “The game I began playing is not the same game that exists now. The experiences I had that first week, month, even year were only a slice of what life was like in the space over the long run” (p. 17). While the data for this dissertation was being collected between 2004 and 2009, World of Warcraft evolved through patches<sup>1</sup> and expansions released by Blizzard Entertainment, and the game culture changed some behaviors in response.

It is also important to point out that my experiences with World of Warcraft over time changed my own impressions and understanding of the game and game culture. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to recreate some of the layers of complexity possible within the game space and then to unwrap and examine the details more closely, in order to present both the massive amount of information flung at the players during gameplay, but also to explain how the information is organized and understood. One of the main tools used during the data-collection process was to look at behaviors within the game that did not fit my expectations nor those of other players. Following the example of Nardi (2010), I attempted to “follow the interesting and the unexpected as they [were] encountered in the field” (p. 27). After having identified patterns of behavior through participant-observation, I explored concepts more deeply through one-on-one interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> “Patches” are updates to software that Blizzard Entertainment provides for free, as opposed to an expansion which includes major updates and needs to be purchased.

The majority of the interviews were performed through in-game text chat, but also included IM chats (using third-party clients like MSN Live, AIM, Yahoo and Skype) and voiced interviews using VoIP software like Ventrilo or, occasionally, by telephone.

## **Subjects**

As mentioned previously, the study of digital games, especially massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like World of Warcraft, has attracted researchers from a variety of fields. However, a good portion of those studies focus on the most commonly occurring behaviors and statistics in order to develop an understanding of the stereotypical traits among players and a predictive model for “gamer” behavior. Other studies, such as Taylor (2006b), Nardi (2010), and Chen (2010) are more exploratory in nature, but they also seek to describe the motivations of the typical gamer. In contrast, subjects for this dissertation are second-generation gamers—those players who are not immersed in first-generation “typical” gamer culture and playing habits. The specific subjects were selected through a combination of two elements: identifiable game play habits made apparent by the structure of play in World of Warcraft and my own game play choices.

First, the structure of game play in World of Warcraft is such that every new character created by players starts at level 1, with limited skills and weak weapons and armor. Computer-controlled, non-player characters (NPCs) are immediately visible, asking the player to complete quests for experience and other rewards. Nearby animals are weak and easy to kill. Level 2 is gained in minutes, with each successive level being more difficult to attain. Levels 1 through 10 introduce new features of the game and new

character abilities and culminate in travelling to a new, slightly more difficult area. The first part of the game is mainly spent leveling<sup>2</sup> characters up to the level cap. With the initial release of World of Warcraft in November of 2004, characters could be leveled to 60, with each successive release of game expansions raising the level cap to 70, then 80, then 85. While leveling, players can choose to explore other aspects of the game such as developing crafting skills, gathering reputation with various game factions, or competing in player versus player matches. During their other activities, the character continues to gain experience in order to reach the next level, which may open access to new character skills or new quests. When players complete the “level grind” and reach the level cap, they start the second part of the game and are eligible for “end-game content.” End-game content includes difficult challenges requiring coordinated actions by large groups of people, known as raids<sup>3</sup>. Games researchers have collected a lot of information about group behavior (e.g. Chen, 2010; Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee & Nickell, 2006), culture creation (Taylor, 2006b), and gaming dispositions (Brown & Thomas, 2008; Thomas & Brown, 2007, 2009) from studying raids.

Many first-generation gamers hurry through the leveling to get to the challenging end-game content. In contrast, the subjects of this project were identified by their focus on leveling, rather than end-game content. For many of the interviewees, the World of

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<sup>2</sup> Collecting enough experience points to attain the next character level. The amount of required experience is tiered so that later levels are more difficult to complete and take longer to attain.

<sup>3</sup> During the initial “vanilla” release of World of Warcraft, end-game “raiding” involved the coordinated actions of 40 players. It was time-consuming, challenging, and made for hardcore players. During the Burning Crusade and Wrath of the Lich King expansions, raiding became progressively more striated for different levels of challenge. 5, 10, 20, and 25 players could participate in group raids and receive appropriate rewards.

Warcraft game consisted only of leveling or other activities like crafting<sup>4</sup> and they would play several lower-level alternate characters (alts) instead of leveling one character for raiding. Others would level a character and casually explore raiding, generally without the skills or knowledge required for these complex coordinated activities. The second-generation gamers interviewed throughout this project were identified because their gameplay focused on exploring the first part of the game rather than leveling as efficiently as possible in order to access the second part of the game.

The second factor that allowed me access to second-generation gamers was my game-play choices. During my data collection in World of Warcraft between 2004 and 2009, I switched servers<sup>5</sup> many times for personal and professional reasons and I played both Horde and Alliance<sup>6</sup> characters of every class. I enjoyed the game aspect of World of Warcraft and was fascinated by the complex social structures I watched develop, but, especially as a graduate student with limited free time, I often resented the demands on my time made by the game structure and by the people within the game. I repeatedly created new characters (alts) that no one knew were played by me, and several times I shifted to a new server in order to ‘play the game in peace.’ Although I had a number of

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<sup>4</sup> “Crafting” is, in essence, a mini-game that players can play within World of Warcraft. Characters can learn to craft useful, but non-essential items such as armor, weapons, vehicles, or potions. Collecting craft materials, learning new recipes, and slowly increasing the crafting skill of the character becomes a game within the game.

<sup>5</sup> The World of Warcraft game is accessible online on a number of servers, which hold ~5,000 players each. The servers are divided by the type of player interaction desired by the players: PvE (Player versus Environment, where players only attack each other in specified situations), PvP (Player versus Player, where players have more opportunities to attack each other), or RP (Role-Playing, where players create personae for their characters and interact with each other through those personae).

<sup>6</sup> World of Warcraft separates players into two factions, Horde or Alliance. Each faction has its own history and idiosyncrasies and is at war with the other, inducing school-spirit-style fandom and opening opportunities for player versus player actions within the game.

characters, I initially resisted letting characters reach the level cap, thereby keeping them ineligible for time-consuming end-game content. Later, some of my characters reached the level cap alongside second-generation players so I was able to participate in their exploration of raiding.

The choices I made to limit my deep connections to servers, guilds<sup>7</sup>, or characters became an integral component of my research methodology and contained several benefits. First, I spent a lot of time “pugging” – playing with pick-up groups (PUGs) of random players in the area or with players doing the same activity I wanted to do. This meant I was frequently exposed to new players, rather than maintaining a more consistent relationship with a fixed set of players. Second, I was often a solo player, which made me appear more available for conversation and for joining forces with other people in the same in-game area. Third, while leveling new characters, I met a large number of my subjects in areas of the game geared toward characters in the 40s and 50s levels<sup>8</sup>, or, after the level caps had been raised, in the 60s or 70s levels<sup>9</sup>. Players who were just trying the game and did not like it rarely made it to these levels, whereas the first-generation players already knew the most efficient means of gaining experience and quickly leveled out of

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<sup>7</sup> According to Blizzard Entertainment, “Guilds offer many benefits including free items, opportunities for groups, access to trade skill masters, quest items, and readily available trade skill ingredients through gathering guild members. You may discover that a guild greatly enhances your gameplay experience. You can meet friends, share adventures, and find people to protect you if you fight in faction versus faction combat. Typically, players in good guilds can go places and do things that players in poor guilds or no guild can't. This is especially the case at maximum character level (80), where the dungeons become very challenging,” (2010b, “Joining Guilds”).

<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Tanaris, Southern Stranglethorn Vale, Un’Goro Crater and Feralas.

<sup>9</sup> Specifically Zangarmarsh, although level progression in The Burning Crusade and Wrath of the Lich King expansions included a wider range of areas in which to level.

these areas, often recruiting a higher level member of their guild to help them level faster. That left players who did not know the areas or the quests because they were hitting this level for the first time, often because they had purchased World of Warcraft late, after hearing friends/siblings/significant others talking enthusiastically about what a fun game it was. These second-generation gamers, who did not behave like traditional gamers and, in many cases, seemed to be playing a different game than the one my first-generation gamer friends discussed, became the subjects of this dissertation.

Countless World of Warcraft players were my guides to gamer culture, but 105 subjects were specifically observed and interviewed for this research over a period of several years. The subjects were 27 women and 78 men residing in North American or choosing to play on U.S. servers<sup>10</sup>. The length of their participation in this study varied, although all of the interviews involved multiple conversations over time. The personal stories, experiences and stated opinions will be presented in the form of an ethnographic allegory (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) throughout this dissertation. The following stories and experiences happened to individuals that I observed or interviewed; however, the subjects' personal details have been changed so that their stories are still representative but their personal anonymity is maintained.

## **Chapters Overview**

Researchers, the media, concerned citizens and politicians have attempted to unravel the social implications of online communication technologies in order to

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<sup>10</sup> As of March 2011, 241 servers were accessible to U.S. and Australian players, while a separate set of servers were available for European and Asian players. The majority of the players on U.S. servers are American, but international players also play on U.S. server, including players I met from Singapore, United Arab Emirates, Poland, Canada, Korea, Australia and Japan.

understand and control their potential, but the social and cultural discussion about what role communication technologies should have in our lives is ongoing. The key areas addressed in this dissertation – learned behavior, personal and social identity performance, and “addiction” – are so central to communication technologies that they each have their own bodies of research that span several disciplines. Four of the chapters of this dissertation will each address one key area of research about the intersection of technology and society. The discussions are exploratory in nature, built on the premise that the second-generation research subjects, by being in the process of entering first-generation gaming culture, can offer new insights into these areas.

**Chapter 1: Understanding the disposition of second-generation gamers.**

Both the academy and the media continue to question the connections between technology and learning: What are digital game players really learning when they spend hours playing games like Breakout (Sudnow, 1983) or playing puzzle games? Can games where you are shooting things (Gee, 2003) teach something more constructive than violence? Concerns over the content and structure of network communication technologies are a continuing point of contention between consumers and regulators. There is a strong rhetoric of games as behavioral modifiers, e.g., that playing a war-simulation game involving shooting soldiers will make players more likely to pick up a real gun and shoot people. This rhetoric is technologically deterministic and is often associated with portrayals of violence, aggression, and disconnection from reality (Goldstein, 2005). Rather than focusing on the impact of digital game content, this chapter looks at *dispositions* that are learned through the merging of play and learning

within the socially created environment of the game space (Thomas & Brown, 2009).

“More than simply a means to learning, play is a way of thinking about more than what we know. It is, following Gilbert Ryle’s (1949) notion of mind, a disposition toward the world, a way of not only seeing the world but of seeing ourselves in it and the various possibilities that the world presents” (Thomas & Brown, 2007, p. 156).

In contrast to first-generation gamers, second-generation gamers generally do not react to the game or to other players like more experienced players and are often labeled as “newbies,” in reference to their poor playing skills. To first-generation gamers, second-generation gamers are simply playing the game wrong, a sentiment that has happened with previous technologies when they became more commonly used. The friction between first- and second-generation gamers allows insights not only into what behaviors are expected (and are missing on the part of the second-generation gamers), but also the general dispositions of thinking that first-generation gamers have learned through game play and which the second-generation gamers lack. This chapter discusses the play habits and identifying characteristics of second-generation gamers by contrasting the dispositions developed by first-generation gamers (Brown & Thomas, 2008; Thomas & Brown, 2007, 2009) with the dispositions of second-generation gamers.

## **Chapter 2: Online identity performance.**

This chapter explores the key research surrounding the performance of identity in online spaces and provides a framework for the two following chapters. While many researchers have explored how mediated communication aids in the thoughtful creation of an online personae (cf. Turkle, 1995; Nakamura, 2002, 2008), the research in game

spaces has often focused on the visual appearance of the avatar as representative of identity (e.g. Leonard, 2006). This chapter explicates the usefulness of performance studies for understanding how second-generation gamers are struggling to create and maintain both their individual and social identities and discusses how massively multiplayer online games are a logical next step for identity research. I examine the larger context of identity discourse within which digital games take place and set the framework for understanding how second-generation players explore their personal identities and respond to the online community of other players.

### **Chapter 3: Crafting a gamer identity.**

Internet technologies support many new forms of communication such as the affordance that users may choose how they are represented in an online space, including the potential to falsely represent themselves. Validity of identity is a major concern on modern social networking sites that allow users to create an online profile (verbal and picture description of themselves) that is visible to other users. However, there are no MySpace police or Facebook security to make sure that the information on profiles is accurate, leading to mainstream concerns that online profiles encourage liars, cheaters, and sexual predators. In 2006, news stories reported on the role of MySpace in the death of Megan Meier. The 13-year-old girl committed suicide after befriending a good-looking boy her age through his MySpace profile and eventually receiving harassing and hateful messages from him. What caught the media's attention was that the boy's profile had been created by a neighbor, an adult woman, mother of another teen girl. This woman had sent the messages that led to Megan's suicide (Associated Press, 2007, 2008). In

another news story, a nineteen-year-old girl was charged with murder after allegedly using a social networking site to lure the victim to a vacant home where two accomplices were waiting (Shoichet, 2010).

The chapter also looks at how second-generation gamers, who are more familiar with social-networking sites than with online games, perform individual identity through online communication in the game space. Research into online identities often focuses on affordances of mediated communication that allows anonymity or filtering of personal information. “One of the most often-repeated claims about virtual reality is that it provides the technological means to construct personal realities free from the determination of body-based (‘real’) identities” (Balsamo, 1999, p. 123). Without a connection to the physical characteristics of players bodies, categories such as race/ethnicity, age, education level, and gender could potentially be invalidated. However, gender is not only a physical representation, but a social one. “In cyberspace, we can talk, exchange ideas, and assume personae of our own creation” (Turkle, 1995, p. 9). Expectations about gendered, or race- or age-associated behaviors follow users into online spaces, and online spaces have both represented and misrepresented gender (e.g., Balsamo, 1999; Burrill, 2008; Cassell and Jenkins, 2000), race (e.g., Kolko, Nakamura & Rodman, 2000; Leonard, 2006), as well as age (e.g. Pearce, 2008). Turkle (1995) argues that the very act of changing unconscious representation of physical characteristics (what we display with our bodies) into a conscious, actively chosen representation in a mediated space changes how we think about our identity. The representations are not only visual or textual, but are also enacted through behaviors of users in the online space.

The identity performances of second-generation gamers are highlighted when they do not maintain the kinds of gamer identities expected by first-generation players.

The chapter also examines how second-generation gamers craft a gamer identity for themselves. From its earliest iterations, the Internet's ability to filter personal information allowing a user to potentially craft an identity has been a source both of fear (e.g. Steiner, 1993) and freedom (e.g. Gross, 2004). Given the extensive discussions both in the popular press and within technological and academic circles, second-generation gamers are familiar with the rhetoric about the negative (and positive) affordances that mediated communication can impart to online identities. Specifically, this chapter discusses the conscious choices and sacrifices made by second-generation players who are struggling to define their individual gamer identity.

#### **Chapter 4: Performing a social identity in an online community.**

Contrary to fears about isolation, researchers have found that Internet technologies create new forms of connection between people resulting in both friendships and romantic relationships. Researchers have found a wide variety of both types and quality of the social interactions in online spaces (e.g. Chen, 2010; Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006b; Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee & Nickell, 2006) from deep friendships to intense conflicts.

“But while conflict and rivalry both seem to come with the on-line territory, so does romance. A general fascination with the romantic possibilities of the new technology has been a feature of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: On-line weddings have taken place

over both the telegraph and the Internet. In 1996, Sue Helle and Lynn Bottoms were married on-line by a minister 10 miles away in Seattle, echoing the story of Philip Reade and Clara Choate, who were married by telegraph 120 years earlier by a minister 650 miles away. Both technologies have also been directly blamed for causing romantic problems. In 1996, a New Jersey man filed for divorce when he discovered that his wife had been exchanging explicit e-mail with another man, a case that was widely reported as the first example of ‘Internet divorce.’” (Standage, 1998, p. 209).

Romance is not the only kind of connection that people make online. Many users develop deep friendships through community participation in the online space, but as much as second-generation players need to develop a personal “gamer identity,” they must also decide what their membership in the gamer community should look like.

This chapter addresses how second-generation players perform a social identity through mediated interactions with other people. What Rheingold (1993/2000) called a *virtual community* develops in online spaces as participants share experiences and interact through text and other interfaces. The cultural norms and idiosyncrasies of these spontaneous communities have been a point of entry for many researchers, myself included (e.g. Boellstorff, 2008; Chen, 2010; Kelly, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2011a, 2011b; Taylor, 2006a, 2006b); however, the popular press often focuses on the negative impacts of forming friendships and romantic relationships in an online setting (e.g. Alter, 2007). For second-generation players, the performance of identity in social interactions is

influenced both by their perceptions of their personal identity and by their understanding of what it means to be a member of an online community. The ways that second-generation gamers value and respond to online interactions suggest the ways society values communication mediated by networked technologies. As second-generation players develop social identities, they also recreate the game community to meet their social needs.

### **Chapter 5: Negotiating with the “addictive” characteristics of digital games.**

Although *addiction* is generally a physiological symptom, application of the term to compulsive gamblers created an opening for extending the understanding of the word to the Internet, what Griffiths (1995) calls “technological addiction,” a non-chemical, behavioral compulsion (Griffiths, 1995, 2000; Griffiths & Davies, 2005). The threat of addiction can be understood in terms of the breakdown of social interactions. Beginning with “EverQuest widows”<sup>11</sup> and including numerous news stories about the seductive and destructive nature of online relationships (e.g. Alter, 2007; Scheeres, 2001), there are many examples of people neglecting their physical-world relationships for online social interactions. The Wall Street Journal reported on a man who not only spent the majority of his time at the computer, playing Second Life, but also met and had his avatar “marry” a woman there (Alter, 2007), despite his already being married in the physical world. The

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<sup>11</sup> A “widow” is the significant other of an avid game player, one who feels the amount of time and attention focused on digital games detracts from their interpersonal relationship. In a backlash against the popularity of MMOGs, early Yahoo groups such as Spouses against EverQuest (<http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/spousesagainsteverquest/>) and EverQuest Widows (<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/EverQuest-Widows/>) and website blogs such as Everquest Daily Grind (<http://eqdailygrind.blogspot.com/>) and Gamer Widow (<http://gamerwidow.com/>) gathered the spouses and girl- or boyfriends of gamers and allowed them to share stories and commiserate.

term, “addiction,” is connected to prior moral panics and anxieties about technology. Rhetoric about users developing Internet addiction and video game addiction is persistent despite researchers questioning the validity of the label (e.g. Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008).

This chapter addresses the rhetoric of *addiction* to describe people voluntarily spending extended periods of time at a computer and engaged in an online space. Using the term “addiction” evokes a particular understanding of digital games as something that is potentially harmful and needs to be controlled and regulated. Given the political inquiries and extensive discussions of addiction in the popular press and within academic circles, second-generation gamers are well aware of the rhetoric of addiction as potential result of playing online digital games. This chapter explores the range of responses from second-generation players to the rhetoric of addiction and what this suggests about the needs that online communication can fill.

#### **Chapter 6: Significance and directions for future research.**

This final chapter explicates the key contributions of this dissertation to the Communication field and to related research in Game Studies, Performance Studies, online communities research, and Media Studies. The chapter closely examines how the contributions of the research offer explanations for the everyday behaviors of digital game players. In addition, the chapter identifies directions for future exploration into the social implications of networked communication technologies.

## Chapter 1: Understanding the Disposition of Second-Generation Gamers

Much of the discussion about learning and digital games centers around content, for example violence depicted in a game (e.g. Weber, Ritterfeld & Kostygina, 2006)<sup>12</sup>. Inspired by thinking similar to McLuhan's (1967/2004) famous mantra, "The medium is the message," recent games researchers have dug deeper than game content to explore how the structure of a game itself can promote learning (e.g., Gee, 2003). Taking this line of reasoning one step further, Thomas and Brown (2007) changed the discussion from listing the *skills* learned through gameplay to examining the *disposition* that is encouraged by play.

In this chapter, I look at differences in dispositions between "first-generation" gamers and the newer "second-generation" game players who are entering World of Warcraft without a firm grasp of gaming culture. The friction between first- and second-generation gamers offer insights not only into what behaviors are expected of "gamers," and are missing on the part of the second-generation gamers, but also suggests that the friction may be caused by two separate dispositions. This chapter is divided into the following sections:

- Understanding gameplay as a disposition
- The (first-generation) "gamer disposition"
- The second-generation gamer disposition
- Who are second-generation gamers?
- Second-generation gamers and gaming goals

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<sup>12</sup> For a thoughtful overview of violence and digital games, see Goldstein, 2005.

- Second-generation gamers and achievement
- Second-generation gamers and other players
- Gamer culture and the gamer disposition

### **Understanding Gameplay as a Disposition**

In recent years, digital games have become a popular and lucrative entertainment form and are widely seen as a gateway for teaching future tech-savvy generations (cf. McGonigal, 2011). At the same time, there is the fear that players are being indoctrinated with a false view of reality. “In the United States, this fear and fascination [with digital games] goes back to the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan extolled the virtues of games to create a generation of highly skilled cold war warriors, while U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop proclaimed games among the top health risks facing Americans” (Squire, 2002, ¶1).

A positive discourse about learning and digital games has inspired a genre of educational games to teach skills and information to players. Thomas and Brown (2007) note that the renowned social theorists, Vygotsky, Huizinga, and Piaget all discuss how learning and play are intricately connected. Thomas and Brown (2007, 2009) and Brown and Thomas (2008) suggest that dispositions can be understood at a deeper level of understanding, that they organize your attitudes, beliefs, and values. Moving the discussion from content to disposition shifts the conversation away from a specific game or game genre toward looking at the activity of playing a digital game. “More than simply a means to learning, play is a way of thinking about more than what we know. It is, following Gilbert Ryle’s (1949) notion of mind, a disposition toward the world, a way

of not only seeing the world but of seeing ourselves in it and the various possibilities that the world presents” (Thomas & Brown, 2007, p. 105). The question becomes, then, can games cultivate a particular disposition among players, and, if so, what defines that disposition? Contrary to the fears that gamers become mindless, violent, and antisocial, Brown and Thomas (2008) found that the merging of play and learning within the socially created environment of the game space encouraged a “gamer disposition” that is goal-oriented, engaged, creative, and dedicated.

Brown and Thomas describe a “disposition” as a way of seeing the world. “...Being a gamer is a disposition that sheds light on how particular practices work, acquire meaning and value, and are shared within and among various communities and networks,” (Brown & Thomas, 2007 p. 106). An example of World of Warcraft being a lens for viewing the world appeared when a new MMO, Lord of the Rings Online (Turbine, Inc., 2007), was released. A large number of World of Warcraft players purchased and began exploring the new game, and then reported back to their fellow World of Warcraft players about their experiences. Conversations in the public channels of World of Warcraft centered around the differences between the two games, especially focusing on the new abilities and features designed to make Lord of the Rings Online stand out from its competitor. Almost overnight, character guides were created to “translate” the gameplay experience in World of Warcraft to Lord of the Rings Online, e.g., if you were used to playing a Holy Priest in World of Warcraft, then you should play a Minstrel character in Lord of the Rings Online. These “translations” were meant to help players who were familiar with a particular role in group settings find characters with a

similar role in the new game. If, as in the example, their worldview of MMO gameplay involved being able to “heal” other characters, the character guide showed them which class of Lord of the Rings Online characters would best fit their expectations. The guides were designed for people who viewed other MMOs through the lens of World of Warcraft. So if playing one MMO creates a disposition for understanding other MMOs, how might games teach players to think differently about the physical world?

### **The (First-Generation) “Gamer Disposition”**

While others have focused on the skills that players were learning in the large-scale coordinated play that takes place within World of Warcraft (e.g., Reeves, Malone & O’Driscoll, 2008), Brown and Thomas (2008) examined the disposition that is encouraged within these settings. Brown and Thomas describe the gamer disposition as “more than attitudes or beliefs, these attributes are character traits that players bring into the gamer worlds and that those worlds reinforce” (§2). According to Brown and Thomas, the gamer disposition has five key attributes:

- “They are bottom-line oriented” (§3).
- “They understand the power of diversity” (§5).
- “They thrive on change” (§7).
- “They see learning as fun” (§9).
- “They marinate on the ‘edge’” (§11), i.e., experiment with “crazy” solutions to problems.

Brown and Thomas findings contradicted many of the stereotypes about first-generation gamers being unreliable and antisocial people. The authors argue that gamers are goal-

oriented, engaged, creative, and dedicated, and make the kind of committed and creative employees that businesses should look for in their hiring practices.

Using Brown and Thomas' framework as a guide, I examined the gameplay behaviors of the players observed and interviewed for this dissertation and found that player behaviors exhibited two distinct dispositions. The players that Brown and Thomas described were one group, whom I call first-generation gamers. They are steeped in gamer culture and are representative of what Juul (2010) calls a "specialized audience of fans" (p. 2). Their gameplay behaviors are most closely associated with hardcore gamers. The second group and the majority of the players interviewed for this dissertation are what I call second-generation players. Unlike first-generation gamers, second-generation players generally do not react to the game or to other players like more experienced players and are often labeled as "newbies" by first-generation gamers. Second-generation gamers are those players who have not yet assimilated gamer culture and acquired the first-generation gamer disposition.

### **The Second-Generation Gamer Disposition**

First-generation gamers often think second-generation gamers are playing the game wrong. The contrast in their approaches to playing can be understood as a difference in dispositions. Unlike the first-generation gamers described by Brown and Thomas (2008), second-generation gamers have very different expectations about how the game world should work. Following the five-key-attributes structure of Brown and Thomas's (2008) analysis, the disposition of second-generation gamers can be described

as having these attributes: ease-of-use oriented, embody diversity, thrive on consistency, learn only what is necessary and rely on proven solutions.

**They are ease-of-use oriented.**

Second-generation gamers prefer to find a balance between the game and their other activities. They have full-time jobs, families, and friends, and their primary motivation for playing World of Warcraft is entertainment. They are looking for an enjoyable diversion from life, something they can plug into when they have free time, but they are not looking for the commitment of consistent playing or the dedication of nightly raiding. They resent anything that interferes with the entertainment elements of the game. This includes technical factors like Internet connectivity problems and program glitches, or design features like “grinding”<sup>13</sup> for long periods of time, or social factors like “griefers”<sup>14</sup> or spammers<sup>15</sup>. They are willing to consider shortcuts to success that first-generation gamers find offensive. Gold farmers<sup>16</sup> sell gold to second-generation gamers.

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<sup>13</sup> “Grinding” is the term used when a player must perform repetitive acts to progress through the game. The “level grind” is when a player must collect experience to raise a character’s level. Crafting (see reference below) also requires “grinding” to gain experience and move up in craft skill levels.

<sup>14</sup> “Griefers” are players who deliberately interfere with other players in the game, killing them, preventing them from completing quests and generally playing havoc.

<sup>15</sup> Like spam email, “spammers” are people who advertise or make comments repeatedly in a public channel or visible location. Because much of the communication in World of Warcraft is text-based, a character who repeats the same phrase over and over can overfill the chat box on the user interface window and effectively prevent anyone else’s comments from being readable.

<sup>16</sup> Gold farmers are players who play the game solely to acquire in-game wealth and items that they can sell to other players for physical-world money. This behavior breaks the End-User License Agreement of World of Warcraft and many other MMOs, but is a lucrative practice which has inspired international trading in virtual goods. For an overview of the gold-farming phenomenon, see Dibbell (2006, 2007) and Keegan, Ahmad, Srivastava, Williams, and Contractor (2010).

**They embody diversity, but practice autonomy.**

Physically, second-generation gamers are more diverse from the stereotype.

While there have always been exceptions to the young, Caucasian male “gamer” stereotype, second-generation gamers push the edges in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Second-generation gamers also embody in-game diversity in the number and types of characters they play. They try many different character classes and gravitate toward balanced, self-sufficient classes that can “solo.” They create “alts”<sup>17</sup> to level all of the crafts to limit reliance on other players. Where the structure of World of Warcraft encourages and enforces collaboration through group quests or through crafting<sup>18</sup>, second-generation gamers want to play the game on their own.

On the surface, dabbling in many character classes and trying different aspects of the game seems similar to the “Explorer” player type described by Bartle (1996). “Explorers” are driven to fully map out aspects of the game. The difference lies in the depth of exploration. When talking about first-generation gamers, these kinds of players might fill in the entire world map, level three different versions of the same character class to try all the available options, or challenge themselves by repeatedly attacking  $x+1$

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<sup>17</sup> An “alt” is short for “alternate” and is used to refer to additional characters other than a player’s “main” character.

<sup>18</sup> The primary craft professions in World of Warcraft were initially: alchemy, blacksmithing, enchanting, engineering, herbalism, leatherworking, mining, skinning, and tailoring. Later, inscription, jewelcrafting, and archaeology were added. Each character may learn up to two primary professions. Through “crafting” a player refines and combines raw materials into useful items. A key aspect of crafting is that a player cannot complete upper-level recipes in any craft without components from other crafts.

number of mobs<sup>19</sup> to determine just how many they can defeat and to push the limits of their character's abilities. In contrast, second-generation gamers are driven more by curiosity and the desire to be self-sufficient. They explore multiple character classes, but not fully – they will often have multiple characters at low to mid-levels. They learn different crafting skills with their characters in order to trade items among their own characters. They wander through questing areas, but are generally not methodical or efficient about their progress.

In an example of both “ease of use” orientation and embodying diversity, many of the second-generation players I interviewed played multiple characters in one sitting, changing between classes and levels depending on their mood and on their perceived reward. If a second-generation player's level 49 hunter was close to reaching the level 50, they were more likely to continue playing their hunter than to switch to another character. However, a level 12 character can reach level 13 in much less time<sup>20</sup> and the easier achievements encourages playing lower level characters. Because second-generation players have limited time for fun in their busy lives, having multiple characters helps them avoid getting stuck in a difficult area or level until they have the time or inclination to tackle a longer challenge.

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<sup>19</sup> “Mob” is a term used for any attackable computer-controlled character and is thought to be derived from “mobile object.”

<sup>20</sup> The experience required to reach the next level becomes larger with each consecutive level. One of the important elements of game structure is a tiered level of challenge that gradually increases the difficulty level as the game progresses (Koster, 2004).

**They thrive on consistency.**

For second-generation gamers, digital games are a chance to relax and unwind, not a foray into the unknown. Changes to the game system are upsetting and frustrating. First-generation gamers eagerly anticipate the release of new content, explore it, complain about it, and generally see it as part of the natural progression of a game. Second-generation players are also interested in new content, but at the same time complain bitterly about anything that upsets their understanding of how the game works. A 60-year-old player told me she quit World of Warcraft and had no interest in playing again, despite the fact that her son and husband both continued to play. Her major complaint was the geographical changes in the latest expansion. She said, “They changed the maps again. I had enough trouble getting around before without them changing the maps on me.” For this player, complaining about the new and rearranged layout of Stormwind<sup>21</sup> was one way she expressed frustration with change. Because second-generation players focus on entertainment and achievable goals, they resent changes that force them to re-learn hard-earned knowledge about the game.

**They learn only what is necessary.**

Second-generation gamers want to learn how something works quickly, and then to not have to think about that knowledge again. Second-generation gamers have little desire to explore the underlying structures of the game and many players are happy to follow the lead of experienced players. They are more concerned with overcoming the

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<sup>21</sup> Stormwind is one of the main Alliance cities from the first (vanilla) release of World of Warcraft. During the Wrath of the Lich King expansion, one section was extensively renovated to include a harbor with boats to other cities, replacing portal-based travel.

obstacle than in learning why or how the challenge was defeated. For example, very few second-generation gamers are familiar with the World of Warcraft game lore because the storyline is not integral to playing the game. Each race and location within World of Warcraft has an intricate history that is often referenced in the quests available at each location, but the players may not even notice. When a farmer says that the government of Stormwind has abandoned Westfall and asks the player to defend their land from the thieving Defias Brotherhood<sup>22</sup>, players do not need to know that when Stormwind was decimated by orcs, the government did not pay the stonemasons who rebuilt the city, and the angry stonemasons grew to hate the Stormwind populace and formed the Defias Brotherhood to terrorize them<sup>23</sup>. Instead, to complete the quest players just need to locate and defeat 15 mobs labeled Defias Trapper and 15 labeled Defias Smuggler before starting the next quest in the quest chain involving Defias Pillagers and Defias Looters. Because the game lore is not necessary to complete quests like “The People’s Militia,” few second-generation gamers become curious enough to seek the stories behind the quests. In this form, the game is a long series of short quests and activities, rather than a complex interweaving of events, activities and progression in the game.

**They rely on proven solutions.**

Second-generation gamers trust that first-generation gamers have already generated answers and strategies for in-game challenges. They utilize guild chat and general chat as a forum for questions on where to find items or how to complete quests. If

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<sup>22</sup> World of Warcraft Quest chain: The People’s Militia.

<sup>23</sup> For more information, see <http://wow.joystiq.com/2008/04/04/know-your-lore-the-wrynn-dynasty/>.

they are more comfortable with technology, they pick a knowledge database like [www.wowwiki.com](http://www.wowwiki.com) and refer to this website to answer all of their questions, but they rarely contribute information or comment on forums.

When first-generation gamers were playing the first release of World of Warcraft, now called the “vanilla” version, the general chat was full of conversations discussing where to find elusive items or how to complete difficult or confusing quests. Many of these points of confusion were later clarified through software patches introduced by Blizzard and through the development of third-party knowledge databases that collected and stored this kind of information, e.g. [www.thottbot.com](http://www.thottbot.com) or [www.wowhead.com](http://www.wowhead.com). By the time second-generation gamers started playing World of Warcraft, questions in the general chat were often answered with derision, implying that the askers are stupid for (a) not already knowing the answer and being a “newbie” and (b) not knowing to look up information in a knowledge database. Many second-generation gamers would also rather experience how to overcome an obstacle than researching the solution. They prefer learning on the fly or having a more experienced player walk them through the process, an inefficient form of knowledge transfer from a first-generation perspective, but one that appeals to the ease-of-use orientation of second-generation players.

Relying on the skill of others becomes a central source of friction between first- and second-generation players in raiding. Second-generation players join groups attempting complicated battles without the preparation that would make them more useful members of the team. With multiple locations to find written explanations of

battles and videos showing walkthroughs of battles, first-generation players have little patience with the uninformed and inexperienced players.

### **Who are Second-Generation Gamers?**

The differences between the dispositions of first- and second-generation gamers become more apparent in the different playing styles of the two generations, but game study researchers focus mainly on first-generation gamers when discussing “gamer culture.” From its advent, games researchers have described the culture that develops within an online community of game players (e.g. Rheingold, 1993/2000; Turkle, 1995). Online game culture is the topic of in-depth anthropological inquiries (e.g. Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006b), as well as academic journals, e.g. *Games and Culture* (SAGE) and *ELUDAMOS Journal of Computer Game Culture* (Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab). However, within the past five years, the number of digital game players has increased as well as news and media coverage increasing the public’s awareness of “gamer culture” (cf. McGonigal, 2011). In this dissertation I argue that as digital games have become a more popular and accessible form of entertainment, the majority of players in even the MMO games are no longer “hardcore” gamers who have a strong connection with “gamer culture.” This dissertation makes a distinction between first-generation “hardcore” gamers who play games within the cultural framework described by previous games studies scholars, and second-generation gamers who are only familiar with the culture and conventions of gaming from an outsider’s perspective.

The defining characteristics of second-generation players are based, not on the amount of time they spend playing, e.g., Juul’s (2010) “casual” gamer, but on their

gameplay behaviors and their interest in and ability to immerse themselves in the dominant “gamer culture” of the first-generation gamers. Second-generation gamers:

- Are not “hardcore” gamers. World of Warcraft is generally their first massively multiplayer online game.
- Don’t have the latest computers and may not have a fast Internet connection.
- Focus on leveling, “questing” and exploration, rather than complex end-game content.
- Have little to no understanding of game mechanics.
- Feel disconnected from gamer stereotypes about gender, age, and ethnicity.

Second-generation gamers are parents, grandparents, Caucasian, Asians, Latinos, African Americans, heterosexual, lesbian, and gay.

- Often break the norms of gamer culture in language and actions.
- Are the vast majority of World of Warcraft players.

The difference between dispositions is a good way to differentiate between first- and second-generation players. Exploring other aspects of the second-generation gamer disposition suggests a way of understanding how second-generation players see the game world and the other players in it. Compared to first-generation players, second-generation players have different perception of the goals of the game, measuring achievement within the game, and their relationship to other players.

### **Second-Generation Gamers and Gaming Goals**

There is an inherent conflict between the basic approaches to playing the game of first- and second-generation gamers. First-generation gamers have little patience for

players who do not know what they should be doing, hence they refer to second-generation gamers as “newbies”—noobs, nubs, n00bs, newbs, etc. In a response similar to third-person effect “...in the sense that others are seen as being influenced more than oneself” (Conners, 2005, p. 3), second-generation gamers generally see newbies as someone else because although they may be new, they do not consider themselves newbies after even a limited amount of playtime. As individuals, second-generation gamers grapple with the reality that they are new to the game versus their ego which says that World of Warcraft is “just a game” and should be easy to play. These unrealistic self-perceptions of the second-generation players’ understanding of the game are a source of conflict between first- and second-generation gamers, as has been the case with other technologies:

“Another parallel [between the telegraph and the Internet] is the eternal enmity between new, inexperienced users and experienced old hands. Highly skilled telegraphers in city offices would lose their temper when forced to deal with hopelessly inept operators in remote villages; the same phenomenon was widespread on the Internet when the masses first surged on-line in the early 1990s, unaware of customs and traditions that had held sway on the Internet for years and capable of what, to experienced users, seemed unbelievable stupidity, gullibility, and impoliteness” (Standage, 1998, p. 209).

The friction between first- and second-generation gamers is especially apparent when second-generation gamers fail to react to in-game situations the way that first-

generation “customs and traditions” demand. First-generation gamers see themselves as the elite, dedicated few who have watched their game from its birthing pains to the present. To them, second-generation gamers are interlopers, people jumping onto the bandwagon after World of Warcraft has become “cool.” First-generation gamers are not subtle about their feelings of superiority, but second-generation gamers bring their own interests to the game and play the game their own way. Why “crunch the numbers” and do all the “math stuff” to make your character better when someone else has already done it? Why collect multiple pieces of rare equipment to compare their “stats” when other users have already compiled “Best in Slot” gear lists<sup>24</sup>? The challenge is not about exploring the “min-max”<sup>25</sup> aspects of the game, but about experiencing the richness of gameplay to the fullest. Second-generation gamers are, essentially, playing the same game but with a different disposition.

### **Number of hours played does not make an experienced player.**

Some of the differences between first- and second-generation dispositions toward the game can be illustrated by the story of Karl<sup>26</sup>. Karl usually solos—meaning that he plays World of Warcraft by himself without interacting with other players. He plays a

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<sup>24</sup> First-generation players do calculations to compile the optimal combination of items for each character class and spec, then publish these lists so that other players can set goals and do quick equipment comparisons.

<sup>25</sup> “Min-max” refers to using the minimum effort to product the maximum outcome. For example, “min-maxers” would, for a dps (damage per second) class, compare the amount of damage done by each attack, considering the length of time it took to perform the attack and the delay before using the attack again, in order to create a “spell rotation” list showing in which order to use attacks.

<sup>26</sup> “Karl,” as with all the specifically named players in this dissertation, is a pseudonym. As discussed in the introduction, the identifying characteristics of the players have been changed, including their character names. Instead, I have chosen to substitute with common Anglo-Saxon names.

hunter-class character who performs long-range attacks and has a pet that can be used to distract monsters. Hunters are an easy class to solo. Karl rarely PUGs (plays with a Pick-Up Group of random players), although, as he became a more active player, he began offering to group with members of his small guild<sup>27</sup>. After a few interactions, several of the more experienced guild members began avoiding groups where he might be included. One evening, several first-generation players from the guild and I were running an instance dungeon<sup>28</sup> and needed one more character with his class-type<sup>29</sup>. In the instance, Karl's behavior made apparent the fact that he was not familiar with the strategies used by players working in a group, such as maximizing group efforts by focusing attacks on the same target at the same time. Four of the group members, including me, were using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) software to speak to each other using headsets with a

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<sup>27</sup> Similar to a community sports team, a group of players can start a guild with a unique name and logo. According to Blizzard Entertainment, "Guilds offer many benefits including free items, opportunities for groups, access to trade skill masters, quest items, and readily available trade skill ingredients through gathering guild members. You may discover that a guild greatly enhances your gameplay experience. You can meet friends, share adventures, and find people to protect you if you fight in faction versus faction combat. Typically, players in good guilds can go places and do things that players in poor guilds or no guild can't. This is especially the case at maximum character level (80), where the dungeons become very challenging," (2010b, "Joining Guilds")

<sup>28</sup> "...dungeons are areas set up specifically for more private group adventures. These areas, called "instanced zones," allow you and a group of friends to have a more personal experience, exploring, adventuring, or completing quests in your own private dungeon. You also have the ability to invite others into your instanced zone to join you. The monsters in instanced zones are typically more powerful, so groups of players will have to work together to defeat them, but with greater dangers come greater rewards!" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010b, "Dungeons")

<sup>29</sup> At this time, successfully completing dungeons depended on a group's ability to control multiple monsters (mobs) at the same time, systematically focusing mob attacks on the well-armored "tank" character while the "dps" (damage per second) characters attack each mob in turn and the "healer" character both heals and avoids damage. Specific classes such as Karl's hunter have spells, attacks, or abilities that incapacitate mobs for short periods of time, allowing the players to concentrate on other mobs. Later expansions of World of Warcraft did not focus as heavily on crowd control.

microphone. Karl, however, did not login to the VoIP, so the other members of the group talked openly about his lack of experience.

The players engage in a disorganized battle against a small group of mobs.

(spoken)<sup>30</sup> “He<sup>31</sup> just broke the sheep again<sup>32</sup>.”

(typed) “Hey Karl, kill skull, then X, then star<sup>33</sup>” “k<sup>34</sup>”

Another in-game battle ensues.

(spoken) “He did it again. I think he’s using multishot<sup>35</sup>.”

(typed) “Karl, are u using multishot?”

(typed) “no” (pause) “o wait” (pause) “yes”

(spoken) “duh”

Karl’s uncertainty here strongly indicates that he is an inexperienced player because he does not know what kind of attack he is using. Most likely, he uses the same buttons for every battle, rather than efficiently choosing attacks that fit a specific situation. All four

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<sup>30</sup> For the sake of brevity, the spoken conversation is not broken down into individual comments. Typed conversation between two people is separated by quotation marks.

<sup>31</sup> “He” refers to Karl.

<sup>32</sup> One of the crowd-control techniques is for a mage-class character to cast the spell, “Polymorph,” which transforms a mob into a sheep that wanders aimlessly effectively removing it from the fight for a time. The mob remains as a sheep until the spell wears off or until it receives damage from one of the players. In this case, the speaker is complaining because Karl’s attack has hit the polymorphed monster, cancelling the pacifying spell and adding it back into the fight.

<sup>33</sup> The group leader can mark individual monsters within a group with one of eight symbols (Raid Target Icons) that will appear over their head. Marking is used to organize strategies like in this case where the party leader is using the marking symbols to indicate which mob Karl should be attacking.

<sup>34</sup> “k” or “kk” is often typed as a short version of ‘okay’ or ‘yes.’ Occasionally, players will type “y” instead.

<sup>35</sup> Multi-Shot is a hunter-specific attack which, “Fires several missiles, hitting 3 targets (for an additional X damage)” (Hunter User Interface, World of Warcraft, Blizzard, 2004).

of the other players in the group realize that Karl is using a particular attack, but he is not aware until they point it out to him.

(typed) “okay, multishot breaks the sheep. please dont use it.” “k”

Several pulls<sup>36</sup> later, the group is faced with four targets instead of three. In situations like this, hunters are often used for “crowd control” because they can temporarily pacify a target by freezing them (preventing any movement or any attacks) with a pre-set trap<sup>37</sup>. Karl was invited to this group specifically because they needed another player with the ability to incapacitate a mob.

(spoken) “Have Karl cube<sup>38</sup> one.” “ahh. cool.”

(typed) “Karl. youre on the blue square. trap him, k?” “then skull, X, blue, then sheep.”<sup>39</sup>

(typed) “kk”<sup>40</sup>

When the group attacks the targets, Karl sets down an Immolation Trap<sup>41</sup> instead of a Freezing Trap. The mob, not incapacitated, attacks Karl who fights the blue-square-

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<sup>36</sup> In most instance dungeons, several mobs will be linked together so that an attack on one will incite a response from all of them. A skillful group of players will “pull” one set of mobs and resolve fights with them before pulling a second set.

<sup>37</sup> “Freezing Trap” is a hunter-class-specific spell which allows a player to “Launch a frost trap to the target location that freezes the first enemy that approaches, preventing all action for up to 1 min. Any damage caused will break the ice.” (Hunter User Interface, World of Warcraft, Blizzard Entertainment, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> The graphical representation of “Freezing Trap” makes the pacified mob appear to be encased in ice as if they had been frozen in an ice cube. These players use the nickname “cube”.

<sup>39</sup> The colors and shapes refer to the Raid Target Icons with which the guild leader has marked individual mobs. The second sentence indicates the order in which the mobs should be attacked. The “kill order” does not change, so the fact that it is typed out for Karl is the equivalent of explaining something to a child that is obvious to the adults.

<sup>40</sup> Okay.

<sup>41</sup> A trap that unleashes a fire-based attack that does damage to a mob but does not incapacitate the mob.

marked mob with hand-to-hand combat.<sup>42</sup> While this kept the target from attacking the other party members, Karl fighting with one mob meant that we were not all focusing on the same target, our group damage was fragmented, and the healer had to heal both the tank (player with a high amount of armor) and Karl.

After the mobs were subdued, the tank types “what happened?”

This conversation is all typed rather than spoken to include Karl in the conversation. The players are typing what is obvious to them, but not to Karl. This is a “gentle” way of pointing out to Karl that he screwed up and needs to correct his actions for the next battle.

Paul, playing another DPS<sup>43</sup> character, types “I think we had the wrong trap down.”

Here, Paul is using the inclusive “we” even though Karl’s is the only character with the ability to set traps. This particular guild prided itself on being inclusive of players, rather than exclusive like hardcore raiding guilds, and this may have been Paul’s way of kindly pointing out that Karl had made a mistake.

Karl types “yea. sorry.” (pause) “I don’t use traps.”

No one responded immediately in text, but the four other players jumped back to a spoken conversation.

(spoken) “He doesn’t use traps?” (shocked)

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<sup>42</sup> Because hunters have strong ranged attacks, their melee attacks are very weak and they do not have strong armor, so Karl fighting a mob in hand-to-hand combat was not an effective attack.

<sup>43</sup> “Dps” means damage per second. This designation is used for classes and specs that are optimized to attack over healing or defending.

(spoken) “He’s a hunter and he doesn’t use traps? That’s like a mage refusing to sheep or a priest who doesn’t heal.”

(spoken) “Hey!” I said, since one of my characters is a priest class who is specialized to do damage, not healing.

(spoken) “You know what I mean—a holy priest.”

The players are shocked because trapping is a specialized skill of the hunter class and, at the time, was a major contribution that hunters made to group activities. They are shocked because playing a hunter without using traps not only seems inefficient to the other players, but shows a lack of knowledge of and curiosity about the hunter class from someone who has spent many hours playing that character.

(spoken) “Paul – you’ve gotta work with him.”

(spoken) Paul: “I’m on it. I’ll have a class.”

(typed by Paul) “hey Karl, I’m gonna have a trapping 101 class”

(typed by Karl) “yea?”

(typed by Paul) “yep. we’re gonna have you trapping like [he types the name of his hunter-class character]”

(typed by Paul) “Paul’s school of traps”

(typed by Karl) “ok”

(whispered<sup>44</sup> by Karl to me) “I tried trapping, but people yelled at me, so I stopped.”

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<sup>44</sup> A “whispered” text message is visible only to the sender and receiver, not to the group.

(whispered by me to Karl) “no worries, Karl. If you want to learn how, Paul’d be a good teacher, but only if you want to”

(whispered by Karl to me) “I do! That would be fun!!!!”

(whispered by Karl to me) “You and Paul are so nice to me”

In essence, Karl has a very different approach to playing World of Warcraft than the other players. He participates in the same activities—leveling, completing quests, learning professions—but he is not driven to explore, to be efficient, or to understand his character as a part of a larger whole. Karl’s lack of experience doing group activities was not what surprised the other players. They were shocked because Karl had, by this time, played his character for *several hundred hours* and yet understood very little about its abilities. He did not exhibit the curiosity and explorative learning that is a large component of the first-generation gamer disposition. When confronted with something difficult or confusing, rather than puzzling out how Hunters worked, he simply stopped engaging in that aspect of his character class.

Dispositions are more than how people learn, but also define the expectations players have about the (virtual) world they inhabit and their role in that world. First-generation gamers understand the gamespace, in part, as an agreement with the developers—nothing exists in the game world that does not have some purpose. If a wall is covered in the same graphics everywhere except in one corner, then that corner is different for a reason and the player should, therefore, investigate and discover what she can interact with in that particular corner.

Second-generation players do not yet see the game world in this way and rely on first-generation players to show them where the interesting parts of the game can be found. When confronted about his lack of knowledge about trapping in the “safe” space of a guild run, Karl was happy to learn something new and grateful not to be ridiculed for his lack of knowledge. In a raiding guild, first-generation players would be more likely to expect players to supplement their lack of knowledge by seeking answers themselves. Karl, being a second-generation player, preferred being “mentored” by a more experienced player.

**Performing an action does not mean understanding the action.**

Karen reached level 60 on her highest level character after almost half a year of playing<sup>45</sup>. Until level 54, she did not know that to generate the most experience (which needed to be obtained to reach the next level) a player needs to accept and complete quests from in-game non-player characters (NPCs). Instead, Karen had been exploring areas and attacking whatever monsters were in the area for small amounts of experience for each kill. On the surface, Karen’s playing habits are similar to an “Explorer” (Bartle, 1996) mindset; however, Bartle was talking about first-generation gamers who are more likely to systematically explore: “Explorers delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them” (Bartle, 1996, ¶24). Karen was merely engaged in the repetitive actions of running and attacking targets, looting the bodies and, eventually, selling the items for in-game currency.

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<sup>45</sup> Level 60 was originally the highest level achievable. Two expansions later, leveling guides, which tell you where to go and what to do, advertise that they can get you to level 60 in two weeks.

Another significant feature of Karen's gameplay is that she did not engage in the in-game auction-house system. This auction system, built similar to eBay<sup>46</sup>, automates the selling, bidding, and purchasing features and allows players to buy and sell rare or useful items without having to be logged in and at the same in-game location. For example, players sell items required for quests or material necessary for crafting, as well as other rare or useful items. Auction prices are set by the market, meaning that they can fluctuate dramatically as players make and spend virtual fortunes. Items also have a set price when sold to an NPC vendor, which is generally very small. To encourage players to sell to each other, rare items on the auction house might sell for 200 times (or more) the "vendor price." Karen, on the other hand, sold exclusively to vendors. When she collected rare armor that her character could not wear, she sold the armor to a vendor. When she collected high-level leather materials through the Skinning craft, she sold the stacks of leather to a vendor. She collected copper (the smallest form of World of Warcraft currency) for items worth gold (the largest currency) to other players. To Karen, selling to an NPC vendor was quick and easy and the value of the item was clearly listed. Because she did not engage fully in the culture of the game, she did not understand that these same items might have a different value to other players. To Karen, the auction house was confusing and required work. Like Karl and a host of other second-generation gamers, Karen showed little interest in refining her character's skills or in engaging in the game space as more than simple entertainment.

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<sup>46</sup> A peer-to-peer online auction website available at [www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com).

## Second-Generation Gamers and Achievement

Massively multiplayer games maintain a continuously evolving narrative—you are on a journey to acquire status/items/money to help out different individuals and groups in the game. World of Warcraft is designed with a level cap (maximum level) to keep people from getting too powerful. Then, in order to perpetuate the experience of the game (and provide a reason to continue the \$15/month subscription) there needs to be activities for maximum-level characters. Raids serve in this capacity, because raids require complex coordination of multiple people.

Most group activities, such as dungeons, require the coordination of the whole group and one underperforming player could easily result in the deaths of all members of the group. First-generation gamers use a variety of methods to weed out deficient players, including running third-party programs that track the activities and contribution of individual players during fights (Chen, 2010; Taylor, 2006a). Players are expected to be on time, prepared with whatever materials they need for that specific fight, and with a basic understanding of their specific role during that fight<sup>47</sup>. First and foremost, the raid needs to be efficient and the raid leader reserves the right to replace players who are not performing well.

Second-generation gamers tend to see World of Warcraft as social, entertainment space. They often do not know how or where to obtain information outside of the game structure, but rely on in-game prompts and what other players tell them to do.

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<sup>47</sup> Online knowledge databases such as [www.tankspot.com](http://www.tankspot.com) contain detailed fight information including videos of boss fights which outline effective strategies for defeating specific bosses.

A good way to illuminate the differences between first- and second-generation approaches to achievement is to examine the behaviors of both in the same situation. On a consecutive Friday and Sunday from 6pm to 9pm, I participated in two different raids of Karazhan<sup>48</sup>. The Friday-night group consisted of mostly second-generation gamers, while the Sunday night group was mostly first-generation gamers.

Karazhan is a ten-person “instance,” meaning that the location is entered through a special entry point and that, in this virtual space, you are in a unique instance of that dungeon – the actions you take in this space are only associated with your group. So, in effect, twenty “instances” of Karazhan might be running for twenty different ten-man groups, but the actions of each group do not influence the experience of the other nineteen groups. The instances are hosted on a different server from the rest of the game, so technical issues that affect the main server does not always affect the instance servers.

A raid is a difficult challenge and requires delicate coordination—meaning that the all group members must work to complement each other. Karazhan is one of around thirty instances in the game<sup>49</sup>, each of which have their own themes with unique graphics, maps, mobs and bosses (creatures that need to be defeated in order to complete the tasks and clear the instance). At the time of this event, Karazhan was the lowest-level 10-person raid<sup>50</sup>, so many groups attempted Karazhan with the hopes of getting good items

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<sup>48</sup> Karazhan is a dungeon instance in World of Warcraft (see footnote 17).

<sup>49</sup> This number changes as new expansions of World of Warcraft are released and new dungeons are added.

<sup>50</sup> At this time, many guilds had moved from Karazhan to harder challenges. Blizzard Entertainment had changed the entrance requirements for Karazhan so that raiders no longer had to complete a complicated quest line to retrieve [The Master’s Key], if at least one of them had the key. Previously, every member of the raid needed to have the key. Thus, the dungeon was accessible to a larger number of players, many of them second-generation gamers.

from the bosses<sup>51</sup>, learning how to raid and then going on to more difficult instances. Karazhan has a complex map with a dungeon theme – the space looks like a large castle and you move from room to room. From the entrance, you have some choices in direction, but you always have “trash mobs” (mobs that are somewhat difficult to defeat and often come in groups). Defeating these mobs awards experience, gold, and reputation points that can be used to get in-game items. They also occasionally drop useful “rare” items. In order to reach a boss – a mob who has unique attacks, strengths, and weaknesses and is very difficult to defeat – the group must first defeat a series of trash mobs and then the boss. Part of the challenge of raiding is to deduce a successful strategy for defeating each boss. These strategies are then shared via websites, forums, or even YouTube videos. A high level of the excitement and prestige goes with being the first guild to take down (successfully defeat) a boss which means finding or creating a winning strategy. Karazhan hosts around 13 bosses, each with specific strategies to overcome them.

Initially, end-game content (activities designed specifically for groups of maximum-level players) in World of Warcraft was extremely complex. Something like 2% of the player-base attempted the easier raids and less than that succeeded (See

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<sup>51</sup> When boss-level mobs are defeated in Karazhan, they drop two pieces of “epic” gear from a list of items possibly dropped by this boss. An item that has been picked up is “soulbound,” and cannot be transferred to any other player. During the initial (vanilla) release of World of Warcraft, players developed complicated rules for determining which player should have the item. The “loot rules” involved a rolling of in-game dice or were organized around credit for participation, called DKP (Dragon Kill Points) and involved detailed record-keeping and trust. For overviews on the social capital around DKP systems, see Malone (2009) or Silverman and Simon (2009). Later updates to World of Warcraft included semi-automated dice-rolling and loot-distribution options, therefore few second-generation players used DKP systems or the “/random” in-game rolling that required all participants to rely on the integrity of other players.

statistics in Mayra, 2008). When World of Warcraft released its first expansion, Burning Crusade, the design included much more accessible end-game content.

Raiding is designed to be difficult and to require extensive cooperation, including finding the optimal combination of character classes. When players create an avatar, they choose from eight classes. These classes fall into three categories, loosely referred to as Tank, Healer, and DPS (damage per second). To defeat a boss, the Tank, who has a lot of armor and can take a lot of damage before dying, must keep the boss' attention and absorb most of the damage. Meanwhile, the DPS players must attack the boss and slowly lower his health without attracting the boss' attention because DPS-category characters can do a lot of damage, but if they receive very much damage, they die. Finally, the Healer-category characters need to keep the tank from dying from all the damage he is taking, and also keep the DPS and other Healers alive, while also trying to not get the boss' attention. In essence, the character categories are pieces of a whole and cannot succeed by themselves: the Tank does minimal damage and cannot heal efficiently, the DPS cannot receive much damage, nor can they heal efficiently, and the Healers die from a minimal amount of damage and cannot inflict damage efficiently. Tanks are often in the position of leader, healers must be very focused on the other members of the group, and DPS classes have varying levels of usefulness and flexibility, including melee (short-range) classes and ranged-attack classes.

The group on Friday consisted of two healers, two tanks, and six DPS. The Friday group defeated the Opera event (which randomly involves one of three possible bosses or boss groups) and attempted the boss, Maiden. The Sunday group consisted of three

healers, two tanks and five DPS and the group defeated five bosses: Attunmen (the Hunter), Moroos, The Opera event, Maiden, and Curator.

### **The Friday event.**

The Friday-night Karazhan run started badly with two of the ten members losing connection and not being able to get past the authentication server<sup>52</sup>. The Raid Leader decided to continue without them with the hopes that they would join in when they could. I was playing one of the DPS classes. The Raid Leader, also a DPS class, began the raid by pulling (attacking the group of mobs) before everyone else was ready, so the mobs killed us and we had to revive<sup>53</sup> the entire party, which took about ten minutes. By this time, the two missing members had reconnected and everyone was more prepared to start attacking mobs. There were a few more deaths on trash mobs before we got to the Opera event.

In this event, you fight on a large stage and your opponent is selected from one of three plays – Little Red Riding Hood, Romeo & Juliet, or The Wizard of Oz. On this night, our play was Little Red Riding Hood and our boss opponent was the Big Bad Wolf (BBW). One of the unique parts of this fight is that the boss periodically turns one of the party members into a gnome with a red cloak and very little armor and then the BBW

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<sup>52</sup> This refers to the login screen used by Blizzard to associate each player with their particular set of characters. Access is controlled by a username and password. Frequently, after entering the correct information, the login page would say, “Authenticating,” and never complete the login process, making the player cancel the attempt and start over again.

<sup>53</sup> The punishment for death in World of Warcraft is that you are transformed into a ghostly version of yourself and transported to the nearest graveyard. The player must then have another player “rez” (resurrect) them, or the dead player must run their character back to the location of their death in order to “recover their corpse” and have a physical body again. Either option takes time. In addition, players’ armor and gear accrue damage which must be repaired at a vendor in exchange for in-game currency.

attacks that person. The ingenious strategy for avoiding instant death is to run as quickly as possible all the way around the edges of the stage. The BBW runs after you and (if you are lucky) does not catch you. This lasts for 15 or 20 seconds before you are back to normal and the Tank can reacquire the BBW's attention and stop the BBW's single-minded attack on one player.

Unfortunately the Friday group was filled with second-generation gamers who were inexperienced with this fight and they struggled with the strategy. When turned into Red Riding Hood, the player marked for death needs to run immediately, which means all of the players must be paying attention and have good timing. If the player does not run and is killed, the group no longer has that player's healing or dps, which makes it harder for them to defeat the boss. After three attempts, each of which took recovery time, everyone was very frustrated, but the group laughed their frustration off, joking about the guild leader's habit of dying early.

Before beginning the final attempt, the raid leader stressed that the player turned into Red Riding Hood needed to run as fast as possible. The first transformed player died quickly. The second player (me) survived. By the third transformation, the whole group started chiming in on VoIP, "Run, Joe<sup>54</sup>, run!!!!!" and "Go Kar! Run like the little girl you are!" Meanwhile, the group continued to attack the boss and slowly watched his health go down. Other players started dying, but the remainder kept at it, and the dead players participated verbally, encouraging the remaining players and making it seem like

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<sup>54</sup> The players generally referred to each other by shortened versions of their character names. They rarely used real names even when using VoIP.

a group effort. Finally, the group killed the boss with 3 players remaining (one Healer, the Tank, and a DPS). All of the players, dead and alive, were cheering and laughing and excited that they had finally defeated the Big Bad Wolf.

Flush with this victory, the group decided to go on to another boss, Maiden. On the way, one player needed to leave, so another guild member was invited to replace him. A second player took a wrong turn and ended up dead and needed to be revived. In all, it took about 20 minutes to get everyone in the same location and prepared to start killing the trash mobs that led to Maiden. The excitement of the Opera event victory had worn off and the group became disorganized and died multiple times on the way to Maiden. Finally, the group reached Maiden, and died quickly on the first attempt. The group attempted her twice more before deciding to call it for the night. People expressed their tiredness from the previous fight and their frustration with the expense of repairing their armor and weapons from so many deaths<sup>55</sup>. At the same time, the players were happy with the camaraderie of the Opera event and one woman even said, “I had so much fun tonight! ‘Run Joe Run!’” and laughed.

### **The Sunday event.**

The Sunday group had a few of the same participants, but on different, better-equipped characters. In this group, I was playing a Healer class. In addition, we had a different, more-experienced Tank and two other experienced Healers. There was little verbal discussion, although a few jokes were made. This group was more about business

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<sup>55</sup> World of Warcraft’s additional punishment for death is wear and tear on your equipment which the player needs to pay to repair.

than the Friday group and a player who had been in both groups made the comment later that this group was much more focused. There were very few deaths and most of those happened during the boss fights. Attunmen and Moroes were defeated on the first attempt. The Opera event (fighting Romulos and Juliana) wiped out the group once, but the second attempt ended in victory. Maiden went down smoothly, but it was going on 3 hours by the time the group made it to Curator and people were getting tired and restless. Curator was also a new fight for three of the party members. The first attempt was unsuccessful, so the Tank calmly adjusted our strategy (pulling one of the melee DPSers off of attacking Curator and having her attack the mobs that the boss summoned to defend him). The second attempt was successful and the group ended the run after that.

The two experiences of the same in-game scenario are illustrative because they were both fun, but also exemplified the different dispositions toward achievement. This Sunday run was rewarding in terms of loot: five bosses down meant that the group had ten epic<sup>56</sup> items to distribute among the party as well as nine reward badges which could be exchanged for other pieces of rare armor or items. This fulfilled the expectations and needs of those who were interested in loot, but the group did not attain the same sense of connectedness, collaboration, or triumph as the Friday group. The Friday event was unsuccessful by first-generation gamer standards: there were many deaths, the group members did not play their roles well, and only a few pieces of epic gear were obtained. However, the social experience had value for the second-generation players involved in

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<sup>56</sup> In the World of Warcraft game structure, epic items have purple descriptive writing and generally have significantly better bonuses for your character than lower-level items.

the raid. They might have preferred to have defeated many bosses or acquired lots of loot, but they also valued the experience for what it was: gameplay that built a social connection across this group of players and a victory made sweeter through struggle and sacrifice.

Second-generation gamers often measure their achievements on the same scale as first-generation gamers, even though their approach to playing does not lend itself to efficiently overcoming in-game challenges. In order to lower barriers to entry and make the game easier to use, Blizzard Entertainment has implemented many changes to content and game structures. Most notably, Blizzard made multiple changes to the user interface to aid navigation. For example, Blizzard added icons on the in-game map to indicate NPCs that would offer quests or to which you needed to turn in quests. Blizzard has also repeatedly lowered the entrance requirements for difficult content, for example, the key to Karazhan, which was mentioned earlier<sup>57</sup>, as well as making specific boss fights easier within dungeons like Karazhan and Naxxramas. Game content is now more accessible to larger numbers of people, specifically people who had not made the time or did not have the skills to complete the earlier entrance requirements. By lowering the barriers to entry, Blizzard is effectively pushing second-generation gamers into exploring the raiding experience. Blizzard is able to “recycle” locations and bosses previously developed for hardcore raiders and open old dungeons as “new” content for the vast numbers of second-generation of World of Warcraft players.

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<sup>57</sup> See Footnote 50.

Blizzard's changes have led to complaints from first-generation players that the content was now "weakened" to let "sucky" guilds complete it, thereby devaluing the hard work done by the hardcore raiders. The fear that the game developers were "dumbing down" the game was vocalized at the second Blizzard Entertainment Convention in 2007, when the Lead Content Designer of World of Warcraft described the recently introduced rewards for Player-versus-Player competitions as "welfare epics," because "players received epics regardless of whether they won or lost the competitions in which they engaged" (Paul, 2010, p. 159). Paul notes that, "One commentator assessed tensions among players as 'almost a blood feud' with casual players, who typically play individually and for shorter periods of time, and more serious players, who play in groups for long periods of time, pitted against each other (Schiesel, 2006)" (Paul, 2010, p. 159). Although I think his definition of casual players is limited, Paul's term "welfare epics" aptly describes how first-generation players view concessions made to second-generation players.

### **Second-Generation Gamers and Other Players**

Guilds full of second-generation players are often called "casual" or "family" guilds in fan forum conversations. Like in any other game guild, there are lively in-guild conversations and guild activities and the better players guide the more inexperienced players. In terms of achievement, most first-generation players consider casual guilds to be failures. Rather than working together to overcome progressively difficult challenges—a key goal for raiding guilds—the second-generation guilds often struggle

with lower-level areas or the most basic collaborative challenges, because many second-generation players are unfamiliar with group activities within the game.

Many second-generation players spend their play time individually leveling multiple characters, rather than refining the skills and equipment of one character. Justin, for example, intensely dislikes interacting with other players, but enjoys exploring all of the facets of the game. His solution was to purchase two copies of World of Warcraft as well as borrowing the accounts of his mother, stepfather, and girlfriend. He then researched ways to control up to three characters from one keyboard and used his group of characters to explore lower-level dungeons. Justin once told me that there should be “instances” for resources<sup>58</sup> so that he could collect them without being bothered by other players, because he felt that other players interfered with his game. An ideal version of World of Warcraft, for him, would be a solo digital game with an attached chat client that would allow him to socialize with friends, but not interact with anyone in the game. Although Justin is an extreme case, many second-generation players struggle with online social interactions (see Chapter 4).

### **Gamer Culture and the Gamer Disposition**

The second-generation version of the “gamer disposition” resembles general media consumption more than a specialized mindset learned by playing digital games. Second-generation gamers are, in essence, strangers coming into the gaming space and slowly learning how to behave like a gamer. Some never learn, but others start investing

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<sup>58</sup> Materials (mats) such as raw ore or herbs are used with crafting skills to make armor, potions, or other useful objects. Crafting is another set of skills that can be trained and leveled for each character.

themselves into gaming culture (Figure 1). Invested second-generation gamers begin to understand what behaviors are expected of them, and learn about the underlying mathematical calculations of the game structure. They are likely to join a guild and eventually learn how to “walk” and “talk” like a first-generation gamer. As these second-generation players become more immersed in gaming culture, they develop game play behaviors that are more similar to Brown and Thomas’ (2008) gamer disposition. Therefore, rather than contradicting Brown and Thomas’ research, this dissertation supports their findings by suggesting that the “gamer disposition” can be taught to players through the combination of play and learning found in World of Warcraft.

As second-generation gamers assimilate gamer culture, habits of the first-generation “gamer disposition” rub off on the newbies; however, second-generation gamers diverge in their engagement with the culture of the game. Some enter World of Warcraft and start learning the norms of the space immediately. They quickly pick up on the vocabulary necessary to play the game and learn who, how, and where to ask for information. They excel at assimilation into the culture, absorb the patterns of behavior and develop similar ways of thinking as Brown and Thomas’ “gamer disposition.” Although these assimilators did not experience the gameplay that shaped the first-generation disposition, by immersing themselves in gamer culture their “way of seeing” the game world and the other players in shifts to a first-generation disposition.

Other second-generation gamers are resistant to change. They approach digital games like any other form of entertainment media and resent the social pressure to conform to first-generation “gamer culture” that may no longer be applicable to their

playing experience. This dissertation includes stories about many of these players who maintain a second-generation gamer disposition in their approach to playing digital games.

Between these extremes, a range of dispositions develop. At one end are the exploratory, problem-solving, participatory dispositions of first-generation gamers, and at the other is the more passive, keep-it-simple, just-give-me-fun dispositions of second-generation gamers. The space in-between the extremes suggest that consumption of digital games happens with conscious thought about how and why someone chooses to play digital games. People who truly want entertainment that requires no mental effort, no social interaction and predictable results do not remain playing World of Warcraft for long. Second-generation players who start and continue playing World of Warcraft do so because the game offers greater challenge, interaction and, potentially, more fun than other forms of entertainment media.

## **Conclusion**

As the examples in this chapter suggest, second-generation gamers are distinct from first-generation gamers in the ways they play, their motivations for playing, their interaction with other players, and in their disposition. However, second-generation gamers do not consider themselves to be different from other gamers, while also acknowledging that they are not stereotypical gamers. They are motivated to enjoy World of Warcraft, but not to take the game too seriously and they do not understand the first-generation perceptions that there is a “right” and a “wrong” way to play the game, except when other players infringe on their enjoyment of the game. Although media stories have

repeatedly warned the public that digital games have the potential to indoctrinate innocent players with violent or antisocial tendencies, when examined closely, the reality is that second-generation players themselves are changing the structure and culture of games, while at the same time absorbing some of the curiosity and drive essential to the first-generation gamer disposition.

## **Chapter 2: Online identity performance**

In Chapter 1, I identified second-generation gamers as a group of players whose gaming behaviors do not fit the norms of gaming culture. For the remaining chapters, I explore how second-generation players offer insights into key areas of research in game studies: identity, community, and addiction. While exploring the discussions surrounding online identities (Chapter 3) and online communities (Chapter 4), I came to the realization that these discourses being played out in a game space like World of Warcraft are actually two aspects of the same behavior: second-generation gamers are struggling to create and maintain both their individual and social identities. Using the framework of performance studies, the behaviors of second-generation players within World of Warcraft offer insights into how understandings of both individual and social online identities are changing. In this chapter, I introduce identity performance theory and discuss how massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) are a logical next step for identity research. The sections of this chapter are as follows:

- Identity performance as a theoretical framework
- MMOs facilitate identity research
- MMOs take place within the context of a larger discourse of identity

### **Identity performance as a Theoretical Framework**

Concepts around the performance of identity are rooted in work begun by cultural theorists in the 1950s. Burke (1945, 1957) and Turner (1957, 1969, 1982) merged ideas from theater with ideas from anthropology and sociology. Goffman (1959) and others (e.g. Schechner, 1965, 1966, 1973) saw social behaviors through the lens of theater and

looked at identity as a performance that we use to indicate our status in relationship to others. Broader than an anthropological approach, exemplified by Geertz' (1973) suggestion to read culture as a text, performance studies pays attention "to behaviors, to actions enacted, and of course to the complex social, political, ideological, and historical contexts not merely surrounding behavior, but profoundly interacting with it. Meaning radiates from these interactions, from what happens among performers and between performers and performance contexts," (Schechner, 2000, p. 4). Performance studies offers a flexible framework for studying communication that takes place within a virtual world because of the framework's focus on constantly changing interactions.

More recent theorists have explored how new kinds of identity performance are made possible by the affordances of online communication. Turkle's (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* looked at how the affordances of the Internet encouraged certain modes of thinking about identity and representation. "In cyberspace, we can talk, exchange ideas, and assume personae of our own creation" (Turkle, 1995, p. 9). She argues that the very act of changing unconscious representation of physical characteristics (what we display with our bodies) into a conscious, actively chosen representation in a mediated space changes how we think about our identity. The representations are not only visual or textual, but are also enacted through interactions of users in the online space—a behavioral performance of identity. Although her research mostly focused on chat rooms and spaces where participants interacted through text, Turkle's work was instrumental in looking at virtual identities through the lens of performance.

Balsamo (1996) used biopolitics to examine representations of the gendered body in both the virtual and physical worlds. She identified spaces where technology and the physical body intersect and used these intersections as examples to explore larger social discourses about women's bodies. Like Turkle, Balsamo examined how the physical body was reinterpreted and represented by virtual bodies in cyberspace. Balsamo focused on the performance of gender, which is still an aspect of the gamer identity that is in negotiation. Balsamo's interest in the performance of a gendered identity is even more relevant for second-generation gamers because second-generation players are more likely to be women, transgendered and other gendered players (cf. Leonard, 2006; Williams, D., Yee, N., & Caplan, S.E., 2008) than first-generation gamers, who are still primarily male (cf. Burrill, 2008; Griffiths, Davies & Chappell, 2003, 2004). Burrill (2008) did a close examination of gamer culture and described it as a hypermasculine space closely aligned with "boy culture" with clearly gendered roles—men are competitive and elitist, while women are sexualized fantasies or competitive tomboys. Like ethnicity and age, the performance of gender is just one facet of understanding how performance studies offers insights into individual and social identities in World of Warcraft. Following in the footsteps of the above cultural theorists, both Chapters 3 and 4 explore how first- and second-generation gamers in World of Warcraft negotiate a performance of identity individually and as a member of an online community. The affordances of computer-generated avatars in a computer-generated world create opportunities for identity performance unparalleled in the physical world.

### **MMOs Facilitate Identity Research**

An MMO like World of Warcraft is a rich space for inquiry into identity performance. First, networked communication technologies allow communication to be divorced from the physical body. Second, player identities are often understood through the roles<sup>59</sup> their characters play in the game and their behaviors toward other players. Lastly, initial interactions are generally structured and task-oriented, which facilitates communication between strangers.

#### **Virtual identities are not directly tied to the body.**

Many theorists have examined the potential of the Internet and online communication for identity exploration because identities are not limited by physical prejudices. “One of the most often-repeated claims about virtual reality is that it provides the technological means to construct personal realities free from the determination of body-based (‘real’) identities” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 123). Initial investigation of how identity could be performed with online technologies was directly tied to concerns about technology’s potential to aid deception (e.g. Donath, 1999). Others, like Turkle (1995) saw this potential as freeing:

“On MUDs [text-based online communication platforms], one’s body is represented by one’s own textual description, so the obese can be slender, the beautiful plain, the ‘nerdy’ sophisticated. A New Yorker cartoon captures the potential for MUDs as laboratories for experimenting with one’s identity. In it, one dog, paw on a computer keyboard, explains to

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<sup>59</sup> By roles, I mean the Tank, Healer, or DPS roles taken on by players in a group.

another, ‘On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.’ The anonymity of MUDs—one is known on the MUD only by the name of one’s character or characters—gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones” (Turkle, 1995, p. 12).

Online communication creates a sense of anonymity and security, as if the user was safely hidden behind layers of technology. Westecott (2009) describes the use of performance studies to understand the relationship between players and their avatars as puppetry, where the player is both the director and audience of the performance. At the same time, scholars like Rheingold (1993/2000) recorded the deeply personal connections and communities that can develop within online communities. As these two different perspectives suggest, identities within digital mediated places are both constrained and freed by their virtual setting.

Turkle and Rheingold were discussing text-based communication—some of the earliest online communities. MMOs are a more sophisticated online community with a visual component that is an integral part of the game experience. In the game space of an MMO, players engage in actions and movements that are not all imagined and the visual adds a strong element of immersion (cf. Mäyrä, 2008; Lee, 2004). Like the physical world, choices that players make about their visual representation, such as choosing the gender of their avatar, can play a role in their identity performance.

**Game structures facilitate performance.**

The performance of identity both individual and social is reflected in our physical communities and social institutions. Huizinga (1950/2006) suggested that social institutions like law, religion, and warfare share a common structure that is very game-like since they, like a game, are voluntary, take place outside of “ordinary” life, happen in a distinct location for a distinct duration and have rules. Although they are serious activities, Huizinga believes that social institutions contain a fundamentally playful element (cf. Kelly, 2009).

Online communities such as Internet chatrooms, listservs, forums, social networking sites, and virtual worlds are social spaces and can have playful elements, but are not games. On the other hand, MMOs like World of Warcraft have an explicit game structure. Online communities are a space for examining how people perform their identity when “identity” itself is constrained by digital limitations, and MMOs are both social digital spaces and games. Two examples of what the structure of MMOs offers for research on identity performance are game avatars and the leveling system.

***Identity performance through character creation.***

When players install and choose to play World of Warcraft and many other games, their first task is to create an avatar. During the creation process, players make choices which then determine the options they have for their future interactions with the game world and, more importantly, with each other. “In travelling through various virtual cyberworlds, it no longer makes sense to ask whose reality or perspective is *represented* in cyberspace; we should ask what reality is created therein, and how this reality

articulates relationships among technologies, bodies, and narratives” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 14-15). Although Balsamo is speaking about “reading” the text of a cyberworld to understand a larger social discourse about technology, another interpretation in a game space is to look at how identity representation is constrained by the game structure and how that structure creates new channels for understanding identity performance. For example, ask any first-generation World of Warcraft player about their character and they are likely to strongly identify with and be able to rattle off their character’s faction, race, class, spec<sup>60</sup>, and stats<sup>61</sup> and/or gear score<sup>62</sup> because these are deemed to be important (and defining) characteristics of both their individual and social identities. Recently, I asked a colleague about one of her friends that she had met through World of Warcraft. Rather than telling me about his trustworthiness or his personality, she replied that he was a raidleader<sup>63</sup> and “his main<sup>64</sup> is a druid<sup>65</sup> ... (used to be a tauren, now a troll<sup>66</sup>), who is

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<sup>60</sup> A player’s “spec” is determined by the skills in which the character has (spec)ialized. Different classes allow different kinds of specialization. For example, a mage will always cast spells, but he/she can specialize in fire, arcane or frost spells.

<sup>61</sup> “Stats” is a quantitative number associated with a player’s effectiveness. A player is often judged by his/her average output. For examples, a healer will be labeled by the total amount of healing he/she contributed throughout a raid, or a tank will be judged on the sum of his/her total armor.

<sup>62</sup> “Gear score” is a number calculated using the total statistics of a player’s weapon, armor, enchants, and inscriptions. Socially, it is used as a metric of a player’s potential contribution to a group.

<sup>63</sup> The role of “raidleader” in World of Warcraft is a position of authority within a guild. It requires the leadership skills to coordinate large groups of people for several hours, and generally falls to people who are reasonably charismatic, trustworthy, calm under pressure, and have integrity.

<sup>64</sup> Players may create up to ten characters per server, but each one is played individually and accomplishments are not shared across characters. As developed in previous MMOs, a player generally has one character that is their “main.” This is generally their most advanced character or the one which they play most frequently. Second-generation players are more likely to have multiple less-well-developed characters.

<sup>65</sup> “Druid” is a character class in World of Warcraft known for its ability to change forms. Druids are a flexible class and can specialize to fill any of the roles of the tank-healer-dps (damage per second) triangle,

usually a boomkin<sup>67</sup> but has been known to tank and heal<sup>68</sup> when necessary” (Brown, J., personal communication, June 23, 2011). From a first-generation gamer’s worldview, knowing someone’s guild role, faction, class and spec also tells the basics about that player’s personality as well as the types of interactions available in the game with that player<sup>69</sup>. Competing factions have the option of helping or hindering a player from the opposing faction. The war between the Alliance and the Horde factions is entirely created by the game structure. Each faction has its own in-game history and idiosyncrasies and is at war with the other, inducing school-spirit-style fandom and opening opportunities for player versus player actions within the game. However, each side, also, is represented as a stereotype by members of the opposite faction: The Alliance describes the Horde as mostly 15-year-old boys with no sense of fair play, while the Horde believes the Alliance is full of unskilled n00bs and girls<sup>70</sup>. These descriptions<sup>71</sup> may seem puerile, but they are

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although they must compete with classes that are less flexible and more clearly designed for a particular role. The abilities and limitations of the druid class have been highly contested throughout class changes in World of Warcraft over the years and their flexibility can make them a difficult class to play well.

<sup>66</sup> Both the “Tauren” and “Trolls” are races available to players from the Horde faction of World of Warcraft.

<sup>67</sup> “Boomkin” is a colloquial term for a “dps-spec” druid, meaning one who is “spec”ialized for dps. In this form, which looks like a chubby bird with antlers (called a moonkin in-game), the druid can cast spells, but is not efficient at the tanking or healing roles. Players acquire specialized items to support their “spec.”

<sup>68</sup> In 2009, Blizzard released a game patch that allowed players to “dual spec,” meaning that at any given time, players could choose between one of two specs in which their character had been trained. Prior to this, many players had paid in-game gold (currency) in order to reset their spec and switch from one spec to another. Being able to play the same character well as both, for example, a tank and a dps, requires both skill and a significant investment of time.

<sup>69</sup> Within the game, the Horde and Alliance factions have limited interactions with each other. Players who create characters on the Horde side cannot type messages directly to the Alliance faction but both have special options to attack players from the opposite faction that are not available within their own faction.

<sup>70</sup> “n00bs” are players new to the game, who don’t know what to do or how to play well. As with many sports, “playing like a girl” is an insult to a player’s ability.

an integral part of creating an ‘us versus them’ mentality which fosters both a sense of community and of competition against the other side.

Within the game space, knowing information like faction, class, spec and level is not only important in terms of instrumental interaction with a player (can this player help me complete this quest?), but also in terms of social interaction with them (is this player going to be skilled/fun to play with?). Each choice made during the World of Warcraft character creation process becomes a space for expressing individual and social identities. Game structures such as character creation offer rich material for performance studies analysis.

***Identity performance through task-oriented interactions.***

World of Warcraft also includes separate ways of communicating across large groups, small groups and individuals (sometimes all at the same time), encouraged/enforced social interaction through group quests, crafting, and guilds and end-game raiding<sup>72</sup>. The game features of World of Warcraft both encourage and enforce competitive and collaborative interaction. After building a new character, a player begins the game dressed in basic clothing, carrying basic weapons, and in an area full of weak animals and minor threats. To advance, the player must complete quests and defeat enemies to gain experience and collect better armor and weapons. Gaining experience also results in gaining levels and unlocking skills. No matter what kind of character a

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<sup>71</sup> Variations on these themes for both Horde and Alliance players can be found throughout postings on the World of Warcraft forums: previously available at <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/forum>, currently available at <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/>.

<sup>72</sup> Group quests, crafting, guilds and end-game raiding are described in further detail in Chapter 1: “Understanding the Dispositions of Second-Generation Gamers.”

player creates, the beginning structure of the game is the same. After a few levels, the player is asked to complete a more challenging quest<sup>73</sup> that requires the assistance of other players. These quests range from defeating a marauding raider to subduing political dissidents to killing a beast that is threatening the local area, but they generally include a tough opponent and several lackeys who all engage in the fight at the same time and easily overwhelm a single player. Therefore, players band together by asking for help in the local area chat channel, or by joining an automated “Looking for Group” system, which has gone through many iterations in an effort to fill the need of players to form groups.

Crafting<sup>74</sup> is another game feature that nudges the player toward social interaction. In the beginning of learning a craft, players can collect or purchase the necessary items for their craft, whether it’s fabric for sewing clothes or herbs for brewing potions. Once the player has progressed, he can learn recipes for making more complex goods, which can require goods made by other crafting skills. For example, in order to make the armor “Dark Leather Shoulders,” a Leatherworker must combine 12 Medium Leather (produced by Skinners), 1 Gray Dye (purchased from vendors), 2 Fine Thread (purchased from vendors), and 1 Elixir of Lesser Agility (produced by Alchemists). The player who knows Leatherworking might also be a Skinner, but because characters can

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<sup>73</sup> During one of the early patch updates to World of Warcraft, these kinds of quests were labeled “(Elite)” to indicate that the player might need assistance to complete the quest. A later patch color-coded these quests as red (meaning they were difficult at the first level that a player was eligible to complete the quest). After Blizzard added more complex quest types, these kinds of quests were relabeled “(Group)”.

<sup>74</sup> Crafting is described in detail in Chapter 1: “Understanding the Dispositions of Second-Generation Gamers.”

only learn two primary skills, the Leatherworker cannot also be a Skinner and an Alchemist. The necessity to trade for crafting ingredients creates another motivation for social interactions and for a thriving economy of bartering, auctioning, and trading. As Blizzard's World of Warcraft Player's Guide states, "In World of Warcraft, interacting with other players is optional. You can reach the level cap without ever joining forces with another player, without even saying hello to anyone on your realm. But by going it alone, you won't be able to master some of the game's tougher challenges, you will likely take longer to reach the endgame, and you won't have access to the game's most powerful magical treasures."<sup>75</sup>

On a more abstract level, initial interactions between players are often formulaic, similar to Goffman's (1959) sense of self presentation. For first-generation players who, stereotypically, do not have a lot of social skills, the "scripted" instrumental nature of first encounters in an MMO space make interactions go more smoothly. Other players can be easily categorized by their skills, gear score, achievements, and guild affiliation as a way of making sense of social interactions. A player's contribution to group activities can be accurately measured, recorded and contrasted with other players filling similar roles. The intertwining of social interactions with quantitative valuation within MMOs like World of Warcraft makes identity performance visible in an unusual way.

### **MMOs take place within the context of a larger discourse of identity**

The performance of identity that happens within video games is not limited to in-game interactions. Players make connections through shared experiences within the

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<sup>75</sup> Blizzard's World of Warcraft Players Guide is available at <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/guide/>.

game, shared interests, and hours of interaction during game play. Those connections are reinforced through a larger context of participatory fandom (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b) outside the game. These out-of-game opportunities for self-identification include third-party informational websites, fansites dedicated to everything from guilds to classes to individual players, gameplay videos posted on sites like YouTube, machinima<sup>76</sup>, fan conventions, and fan-related accessories, like faction-specific baby clothes. World of Warcraft references popular culture within the game, and, as will be discussed more fully in later chapters, World of Warcraft is referenced by popular culture in turn.

Beyond discussions of fandom, World of Warcraft was produced within a broader context. “Any given text within a discursive system is a symbolic enactment of the cultural preoccupations of a particular historical conjunction” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 4). To situate “gamer culture” in context, I look at what Balsamo describes as “a continuum of discourses” (p. 4). Discourses about video games are built within discourses surrounding leisure activities, technological expertise and mediated communication. Video game playing is associated with other activities in those categories that have social elements, such as television watching, social networking, and online dating websites. The discourses about technology, communication, and leisure are connected to a larger discourse around what it means to be a productive member of society. Players enacting their identity within a video game are also expressing their understanding of who they are as players, as consumers, as technology users, and as members of a larger society. While

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<sup>76</sup> A genre of video where storylines are acted-out by game characters with an overlaid dialogue. These can range from music videos “sung” by video game characters, to elaborate “movies”.

this dissertation focuses on four main topics in game studies, it also seeks to create a deeper understanding of the role technology takes in our society.

Through the lens of performance studies, in Chapter 3 I look closely at different ways that individual characteristics of gender, race and age are enacted by players through their interactions with the game and with other players. In Chapter 4, I explore the social identities that players develop through their participation in the game community and examine how this connects with their investment into other players.

### Chapter 3: Crafting a Gamer Identity

Second-generation gamers are not your typical gamer. They do not match the physical stereotypes of a first-generation gamer— male, adolescent, and Caucasian—and they bring a different disposition to their gameplay; however, the general discourse about gamers and gamer culture is still focused on first-generation gamers (Griffiths, Davies & Chappell, 2003, 2004). In this chapter, I examine how second-generation players perform identity in World of Warcraft and how they individually craft their gamer identity by choosing to highlight or hide aspects of their physical identities. The chapter is divided into the following sections:

- The first-generation gamer stereotype
- “Gamers are male”: Performing gender
- “Gamers are Caucasian”: Performing ethnicity
- “Gamers are adolescent”: Performing age

#### The First-Generation Gamer Stereotype

First-generation gamer identities and gamer culture developed around a set of conventions about who the players were, what roles<sup>77</sup> the players took within the game and how the players negotiate competition and team-based collaboration. First-generation players are hobbyists. They spend time and money building computers that enhance their gaming experience by, for example, improving graphics displays or increasing processing power. During raids, they boast about ping speeds and calculate lag time. They are nerdy, with all the associations that go with being nerdy. “In the United States, our collective

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<sup>77</sup> By “role” I refer to the Tank, Healer, or DPS role that players take on when playing in a group.

stereotype conjures up an immediate image: Isolated, pale-skinned teenage boys sit hunched forward on a sofa in some dark basement space, obsessively mashing buttons” (Williams, 2006, p. 229). Mainstream media represent the stereotypical gamer as a young Caucasian male—someone who has the time and money to play computer games—or as an older, dysfunctional adult still trapped in childhood.<sup>78</sup> This stereotype is what second-generation players expect when they start playing World of Warcraft; however, the social structure of the game is not defined by the game, but is enacted by the players.

Social interaction in a game is goal oriented at its most basic level. Physical identity does not determine the ability of an individual to contribute to achieving the goal. Rather, identity is socially constructed around determining a player’s level of maturity and expertise. If you need help slaying a dragon, it does not matter if your fellow raiders are women or Asians or grandparents as long as they are competent players and won’t steal all of the loot at the end of the raid. First-generation gamers understand that a player’s performance of being a gamer is more important than their physical identity. For example, one afternoon I was playing a level 13 female Night Elf warrior in Darkshore. I was grouped with a PUG (pick up group) in order to complete a group quest to defeat Murkdeep<sup>79</sup>. Being a low-level area, these PUG members were still pretty new to the game. Because they were not familiar with the quest, I began typing an explanation of what would happen and what the group members needed to do. As I was typing the

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<sup>78</sup> See Chapter 5 for a discussion of media representations of gamers.

<sup>79</sup> All mobs have descriptive names such as “Greymist Hunter” or “Greymist Netter,” but select mobs have unique names like “Murkdeep” or “Xabraxis.” “Named” mobs are usually either part of a quest or offer some special loot and are usually more difficult to defeat than a regular mob.

explanation in short sentences, I was interrupted by a player typing, “r u a girl”. I replied, “yes,” and continued with the explanation. He then said, “no way ur a girl,” to which I replied, “okay, I’m not,” and finished the explanation. The player then said, “wait r u really a girl,” and I said, “yes,” and started the quest. The questioning player, being an inexperienced gamer, was less interested in completing the task and more interested in my gender, perhaps because common knowledge said that all female characters are played by males, or possibly as a means of establishing whether my leadership was valid. If the player were more seeped in first-generation gamer culture, he would have focused more on completing the task and less on my character’s gender and what it suggested about mine.

As discussed in Chapter 1, second-generation players are more diverse in terms of age, race, and gender; however, stereotypes about gamers are still defined by first-generation players and are aided by the affordances of mediated communication. In the online setting, visual clues fade in importance for determining a person’s identity, and their character’s statistics becomes more definitive of their gamer identity. In World of Warcraft, clues to a player’s physical identity come through three communicative channels:

- (1) *Typed.* Typed conversation often expresses the player’s personality. Players will consider word choice, punctuation, use of emoticons (smiley faces, etc.), and use of gaming jargon when seeking clues about the person behind the avatar. For example, when I am typing I spell out words like “you” rather than the simplified “u” and I use punctuation. Based on those clues, other players have inferred that I

was older than the stereotypical gamer and some have asked my age to confirm their assumption.

- (2) *Spoken.* In addition to third-party VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) software, many online games<sup>80</sup> offer in-game VoIP in conjunction with a headset or speakers and microphone which allows players to speak to other players, and voice is used to identify a person's ethnicity, age, or other characteristic. For example, any player who claimed to not have a microphone or does not speak is suspected of being female and, therefore, might not be a skilled player. One deaf player complained that he was discriminated against because he could not listen to vocal instructions. Raid leaders did not want to take the time to type to him, so they refused to add him to groups.
- (3) *Behaviors.* Playing styles are scrutinized by other players not only in terms of ability but also for clues about the player's physical identity. Players who are friendly, more cooperative and/or are playing characters that take on supporting roles in groups, such as Healer classes, are more likely to be asked if they are female, while Tanks and/or more competitive players are likely to be thought of as male.

Gamers collect identity clues from to all three communicative channels when they are interacting with new players. For example, Dan, a player with a thick Eastern-European accent, knew that people had trouble understanding his English and felt like

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<sup>80</sup> Examples include World of Warcraft and Second Life (Linden Lab, 2004), as well as games played on Xbox consoles using Xbox Live or Playstation consoles using the Sony Entertainment Network.

people treated him differently because of his accent. To prevent discrimination, Dan told other players that he did not have a microphone. He would login to VoIP so that he could listen to instructions, but would always respond in text. In addition, he was a laid-back, helpful player and his main character was a healer-class resto shaman. As a result, many players assumed that he was a girl. Sometimes he played along with that assumption for fun, rather than argue with players who might insist on hearing his voice. He learned quickly that it was easier to conform to the expectations of other players than to emphasize his differences. Dan and other second-generation players struggle with discrepancies between their own physical characteristics and gamer stereotypes about gender, ethnicity, and age. This chapter looks at second-generation players' development and performance of their "gamer identity."

### **"Gamers are male": Performing Gender**

Within World of Warcraft, the gender of the character has little<sup>81</sup> impact on the abilities of the character within the game. Male and female warriors do not do different amounts of damage. Male and female holy priests do not heal better. Therefore, gender is an entirely personal decision and the performance of gender is performed by the players, not by the structure of the game.

First-generation representations of females fall into two categories: a hypersexualized controllable character or a sexy tomboy player who's "just one of the guys". The hypersexualization of females in video games is well documented (cf. Downs

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<sup>81</sup> The differences between male and female characters are not about how well the characters can accomplish goals in the game, but are the dance moves, the appearance of pieces of gear, and the jokes and comments a character makes.

& Smith, 2010) but alienating for many second-generation female gamers who complain about their characters being virtual barbies. Female gamers can relate more closely to the tomboy identity. Jenkins (1998) described “gamer grrlz”<sup>82</sup> as hardcore gamers who assert their gender as an integral part of their gaming identity. Media representations of gamer grrlz focus on young, attractive players who defeat male players at their own games while wearing mini-skirts and full make-up. An example of this is the industry-created gaming group, Frag Dolls. “The Frag Dolls are a team of professional female gamers recruited by Ubisoft to promote their video games and represent the presence of women in the game industry. These gamer girls play and promote games at industry and game community events, compete in tournaments, and participate daily in online gamer geek activities” (Ubisoft, 2010, “About Us”). This example of “girl gamers” is based on first-generation gamer feminine ideals, which makes them difficult for second-generation female players to identify with Frag Dolls.

Turkle (1995) believed that the affordances of online communication give users a “chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones” (p. 12). Rather than exploring what it meant to “be male,” second-generation gamers are more interested in developing a gamer identity that allows them to be authentic without being ridiculed by first-generation players. The

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<sup>82</sup> Several communities of female gamers exist outside of a specific game, offering video game commentary and advice from a female perspective and highlighting female gamers and members of the game industry. For example: Gamer grrlz (<http://www.gamergrrlz.net/>), Girl Gamer (<http://www.girlgamer.com/>), Gamer Girls Unite (<http://www.gamergirlsunite.com/>), and Lady Gamers (<http://www.ladygamers.com/>) which also includes a list of female-only gaming guilds or clans.

gender dynamics of the guild Datarix<sup>83</sup> offered insights into how second-generation players perform gendered identities in World of Warcraft.

Brandon is the guild leader and founder of Datarix, whose small membership is full of second-generation players. Brandon treats gender like a puzzle challenge, a mystery mini-game within the game itself. When he needs to add an unknown player to fill a group, he deliberately approaches female avatars. Brandon knows that females are more likely to make female avatars<sup>84</sup>, so he hopes that the players will also be female, but he does not ask them immediately. Brandon looks for gender clues in text, voice and behaviors while running quests or a dungeon with the unknown female character or engaging them in extended conversation. If he thinks that the player might be physically female, he sends the character a virtual rose through the in-game mail system. If he gets a positive response to the rose, he decides that they are female and invites them to join his guild. Because of this recruiting tactic, Datarix is predominantly populated by female members, an unusual circumstance since women are still a minority among game players (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Griffiths, Davies & Chappell, 2003, 2004).

Interestingly, one of the enticements Brandon used to recruit new members was that there were already so many other female players. One new recruit said, “i have [another] guild i play with but i want to play with other women.” Within Datarix, the female players could be more authentic to their physical identities without fear of being treated differently.

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<sup>83</sup> Like player names, references to guild names have been changed throughout this dissertation.

<sup>84</sup> Research supports Brandon’s observations, cf. Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008 and Yee 2006.

Second-generation players are conscious of the gender choices that they make and that, similar to the physical world, expectations around behavior change based on gender. Many second-generation gamers *pass* as a stereotypical player as a way to assert their competency as gamers. The assumption that all players are male, regardless of their avatar's gender, creates a space for anyone who does not fit the stereotype to engage in passing since "masking discreditable identities with more socially acceptable ones through passing offers individuals the potential to escape the expectations others impose on them because of their group membership and its related stigma" (Renfrow, 2004, p. 488). Much like a homosexual passing for a heterosexual in a heterosexual-centric world, some female players use the technical affordances of the online setting to pass as males to evade assumptions related to their physical gender. "Many individual identity deceptions are acts of omission, rather than commission; they involve hiding one's identity" (Donath, 1999, p. 49).

Describing second-generation identity performance as passing is more accurate than identity exploration. Although players may dabble with gender-swapping in their social interaction, there is no incentive within the structure of the game for players to perform a particular gender<sup>85</sup>. Kendall (1998) found that her subjects, online MUD participants, "dismiss the potential fluidity of online identity as illusory" (p. 130).

"Erving Goffman (1959), in his classic work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, distinguished between the 'expressions given and the

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<sup>85</sup> Specifically designated "role-playing" servers are one exception to this, although only social convention enforces identity performance on these servers; the structure of the game remains the same.

‘expressions given off.’ The former are the deliberately stated messages indicating how the one wishes to be perceived; the latter are the much more subtle—and sometimes unintentional—messages communicated via action and nuance (Goffman 1959). Both forms of expression are subject to deliberate manipulation, but the ‘expression given off’ may be much harder to control. One can write ‘I am female,’ but sustaining a voice and reactions that are convincingly a woman’s may prove to be quite difficult for a man” (Donath, 1999, p. 36).

Most gender-swapping males were motivated more about spending hours staring at a female avatar rather than identifying as female and exploring their femininity. Nick explained that he created his beautiful female Night Elf<sup>86</sup> avatar because, “after 2 yrs of staring at a lizard butt, i wanted something nice to look at”<sup>87</sup>. Fewer females played male characters. Emily wanted to make a warrior-class character, so she made it male because a big, buff male warrior made more sense to her than a slender female warrior. On the other hand, Alexandra had all-male characters. She felt that she received more respect from other players because she was playing a male avatar and was offered better playing opportunities.

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<sup>86</sup> In the initial release of World of Warcraft, players could choose from eight different “races” with their own history, special abilities, and starting locations on the game map. All of the races were humanoid, but the “Night Elf” race most closely resembled a sexualized human female. Ducheanuet, Yee, Nickell and Moore (2006) note “players clearly favoring the “sexy” female Night Elves (source of much derision in the player community, with stories of male teenagers mesmerized by these characters’ “/dance” animation)...” ( pp. 296-297)

<sup>87</sup> When he says, “lizard butt” the player is referring to his reptilian non-human avatar in Star Wars Galaxies (Sony Online Entertainment, 2003).

Most female players claimed that they made conscious choices regarding language, mannerisms, technology use, and sometimes character appearance in order to avoid questions about their sexuality and also questions about their competence. While digital game advertisers and researchers talk about increases in the number of female gamers, the culture of digital games still reinforces gender roles and treats female players as an anomaly. Carrie said, “we talk differently than men and they always know we're women right away usually” and Abby said, “I try not to use girly words.” Both women feared that other (male) players would not accept them as accomplished players otherwise. For them, *passing* was not a conscious choice, but a justification for being recognized for their gaming skills, rather than their gender, the way they speak, or their appearance. Social and cultural understandings of expected behaviors for genders move from the physical world into online games, but virtual spaces create opportunities not only for identity play, but for women to receive acceptance for expertise directly related to their abilities and separate from their gender.

Other female players felt that acknowledging their gender allowed them to benefit from gifts as well as easier demands on their game-playing ability and chose not to pass. Oftentimes, the in-game guild structure was seen as a “safe” place where gender should not be an issue. In contrast, interacting with non-guild members in raids or PUGs (pick-up group) was when female players performed gendered identities, either through passing or flaunting their femininity. All interviewees had developed a preferred coping strategy to support, confront or evade perceived stereotypes about their gender and incorporated this strategy into their everyday gaming habits.

### **“Gamers are Caucasian”: Performing Ethnicity**

Much of the discussion about representations (and misrepresentations) of race in online spaces (e.g., Kolko, Nakamura & Rodman, 2000; Leonard, 2006) centers on the visual aspects of games (e.g., Higgin, 2009; Kafai, Cook & Fields, 2010) and the fact that basic avatars tend to be pink or light-skinned, with the exception of a non-human green, blue, or purple. Within World of Warcraft, a character’s “race” is defined by both visual appearance and “racial” skills available to that character. Other than the superficial structures of the game, ethnicity as an identity, like gender, is performed through social interactions.

Second-generation players are Caucasian, Asian, African-American, Latino, and other ethnicities, but they decide how they will perform ethnicity in World of Warcraft. For example, one player with the racially marked character name Josealvarez liked to go to one of the main cities<sup>88</sup> within the game and tell Latino racial jokes. When other players complain (some more politely than others), Josealvarez replied that it was okay for him<sup>89</sup> to tell Latino jokes because he is Latino. Regardless of the validity of his reasoning, his racial claims were not verifiable other than that he had chosen a Latino-sounding name for his character and he self-identified as Latino. Josealvarez chose to actively perform ethnicity in a way that deliberately disrupted social norms both within and outside of the game.

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<sup>88</sup> Because cities are hubs of activity and the location of supply vendors, many players gather in cities. This means that the “public” channel reaches more eyes than in other locations.

<sup>89</sup> The player’s character was male, so I refer to the player in the masculine form.

Other second-generation players are more hesitant to advertise their difference from the gamer stereotype. While leveling a character in Zangermarsh, a mid- to high-range area of the game, I met a group of Latino<sup>90</sup> players. These players ran in a group of 3-4 players, depending on who was online at any given time, and would grab a PUG player or two whenever they wanted or needed more people. This group of players communicated with each other using headsets and microphones through VoIP<sup>91</sup>, but they did not include the PUG members. The VoIP access was, in part, limited to outsiders because all of the members of this group spoke distinctly Spanish-accented English.

This group made decisions about game play vocally, i.e. where to go next or how they were doing on quest progress. PUG members would often express confusion, impatience or frustration since they could not hear the directions and, from their perspective, everyone would suddenly head in one direction and they would have to race to catch up. Most of the time when there was no VoIP, PUGs communicate by text. In this situation, because all of the usual members of this group would be talking by voice, they ignored conventions and neither typed commands nor responded to typing from PUG members. More than one PUG member left the group abruptly, sometimes after vehemently expressing their anger with the lack of communication from the rest of the group.

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<sup>90</sup> The term Latino is not an accurate representation of race or ethnicity. I use it here because almost all the members of this group acknowledged a Latin heritage although one member was Philipino/Puerto Rican, another was Mexican-American, and two were “from New York City, yo.”

<sup>91</sup> This particular group used a VoIP program called TeamSpeak (TS) which did not require a monthly fee, but limited the number of people who could use it at one time. First-generation gamers generally preferred a competing software called Ventrilo because the user limit made TS useless for raid groups. Therefore, TS versus Ventrilo use was an indicator of the quality/expertise of a group of players.

My introduction to this group broke their typical interactions with PUG members in two aspects: (1) I was extremely knowledgeable about the quests we were completing, so I was directing the activities of the group via text, rather than being excluded from directions. (2) My avatar was female. Among these particular players, homophobia and/or machismo meant that they did not play female avatars and they expressed disgust for any males who did. They asked me directly about my gender and, as was my standard policy, I replied truthfully that I was female. I believe it was the novelty of a knowledgeable female player (or perhaps disbelief) that led them to invite me to join their VoIP and to ask me to continue playing with them. As they grew more comfortable with my presence, they began to call me “chica” and to toss Spanish words into their text and spoken conversations. They overtly expressed their ethnicity only after I had earned their trust. I played with this group for over a month and had intermittent conversations with several of the players for the next two years.

Although they met within the game, for this group of players, being Latinos created a bond greater than the social or game structures of World of Warcraft. The members of this group were located in different parts of the country, only two knew each other personally, and had different economic backgrounds. In addition to their cliquish communicative behavior, this group exhibited other behaviors that prioritized their social interactions with each other over being efficient game players. First, the characters of the players were not all at the same level. The structure of World of Warcraft and many other MMOs include tiered access to map locations and quests. This means that quests are designed to be completed at a particular level, so, for example, characters level 1-10 will

be questing in a “newbie” area and not competing with the characters level 11-20 in another area who have quests involving level 11-20 monsters. It is unusual to have players with a broad range of levels playing together because the game structure is designed so that low-level characters cannot successfully attack high-level monsters, and players of different levels cannot receive the same benefit from doing the same quests. “The amount of experience you get for completing a quest will drop as you get to higher levels. This prevents people from going back and doing a bunch of super easy quests with high level characters,” (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010b, “Quests Basics”). This group, although they gained levels throughout the time I played with them, consisted of three lower levels, 61, 62, and 64, and one higher level 69. The area where I initially met them is designed for levels 60-64, so the level 69 player, Joseph, was over the level for the area. Completing quests in a lower-level area is the equivalent of having the same job as a co-worker, but being paid \$5/hour less than the other person. However, Joseph had set up and was running the TeamSpeak (VoIP, TS) server used by the Latino group and he genuinely seemed to enjoy playing with this group despite having already completed many of the quests.

Another strikingly aspect was that each member of the group was in a different guild<sup>92</sup>. “A guild is a group of players that join together for companionship, adventure,

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<sup>92</sup> Similar to a community sports team, a group of players can start a guild with a unique name and logo. According to Blizzard Entertainment, “Guilds offer many benefits including free items, opportunities for groups, access to trade skill masters, quest items, and readily available trade skill ingredients through gathering guild members. You may discover that a guild greatly enhances your gameplay experience. You can meet friends, share adventures, and find people to protect you if you fight in faction versus faction combat. Typically, players in good guilds can go places and do things that players in poor guilds or no guild can’t. This is especially the case at maximum character level (80), where the dungeons become very challenging.” (2010b, “Joining Guilds”).

economic gain and more” (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010b, “Guilds”). Guilds are both socially and technologically created in World of Warcraft and fill a complicated role in the gameplay experience. They help players develop (1) social connections—people with whom to play and socialize, (2) pride of name/belonging/identification—a group identity of which they can be a member, (3) pooled resources—easier access to necessary pieces of the game, and (4) layers of game structure—technically, being in a guild changes the character’s name label and tabard, gives the player access to a guild bank as well as opening a guild chat channel for intra-guild communication. Games researchers have documented instances where first-generation gamers play a video game with a group of friends and become socially invested in the members of the guild to the point that when a new game is released, the majority of a guild may transfer to the new game and recreate the guild community (e.g., Pearce, 2009). Often players will go on “guild runs” meaning that all of the players engaging in the 5-person, 10-person, 25-person, or 40-person activity are members of the same guild. Other times, guild members will play with members of other guilds when running a PUG or if two guilds form an alliance, but groups of friends who play together consistently generally form or join the same guild.

In contrast to the common perception of what it means to be a member of a guild, the Latino group of players prioritized their interactions with each other more than their interactions with guildmates. The Latinos were each in a different guild. They each spoke well of their guild, but they did not exhibit a strong sense of connection to their guildmates. Only one player, Joseph, actively played with his guild and would leave the group of Latino players to raid or attempt more difficult activities with his guildmates.

On more than one occasion, after Joseph completed the “guild run,” he left his guildmates and returned to playing with the group of Latinos. For these second-generation players, their gameplay needs were being met by other people within the game, but their social needs were better served by finding players of the same ethnicity. Similar to Datarix feeling like a safe place for female players to “be female,” the Latino group’s VoIP was a safe place to talk without being judged for being Latino.

### **“Gamers are adolescent”’: Performing Age**

First-generation players have grown up with MMOs. In 1984, McClure and Mears found that “Frequent video-game players were young, male, and liked competitive activities, such as playing sports. They were bright and liked challenges and science fiction movies,” (p. 271). Twenty years later, many of those bright, young videogame players have become bright, adult video game players, but the stereotype remains about gamers being young. Second-generation players, on the other hand, are many ages, young and old, and part of developing their gamer identity is about how they perform maturity.

Players search for clues among communicative channels to determine the age of other players as a context in which to situate their trustworthiness and expertise. For example, impatient players who are constantly moving their avatar, sliding them side to side, running in circles, or hopping up and down<sup>93</sup> are often assumed to be young, as if the fidgeting of impatient children translated into the virtual space. Players who engage in this twitching of their characters are usually expressing a desire to get through the boring

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<sup>93</sup> Movements in World of Warcraft are generally controlled by pressing and holding buttons on the keyboard, so “nervous twitches” that are visually represented as jerky or repetitive movements of the character are actually controlled by a player’s fingers.

coordination of a group of people and on to the fun action part of the game. This suggests to other players that the impatient player is not able to maintain focus and may not be mature enough to be in positions of authority, such as leading a group.

Immaturity is not confined to the young; however, the young and the elderly are held to lower expectations of expertise than adults. First-generation players used the phrases “just a kid” and “like a girl” to belittle other players or to make excuses for a deficient performance. Both younger and older players are sensitive to age discrimination in the game. Travis, a first-generation gamer, spoke at length about his positive experiences with the Star Wars Galaxies (Sony Online Entertainment, 2003) community and how pale World of Warcraft players were by comparison. While playing Star Wars Galaxies, Travis, who was then 15, only told his age to a couple of select players to protect his reputation. In Star Wars Galaxies, Travis was known as a good source for in-game information and as an excellent dispute mediator, and he believed that telling other players his actual age would devalue the social capital he had created. In this way, Travis and other young players were exploring the performance of maturity in a way that closely aligns with Turkle’s (1995) identity exploration.

Another example of age-related exploration is Wayne, a 14-year-old boy. Within the game, Wayne repeatedly broke the norms of gamer culture and was generally an unpleasant personality. He would frequently ask other players for help or for money but would never offer it in return. He often began a group activity and then left in the middle of it, leaving the other players in a difficult situation. He was also a bad sport and would verbally abuse other players, telling them “u suck.” Several times, members of other

guilds contacted officers in Wayne's guild to complain about his rude behavior and bad attitude. Wayne's membership in the guild was based on nepotism, because his mother was also a member, so despite being removed from the guild several times, Wayne was always re-invited. When Wayne was confronted, he used his age as an excuse, saying, "im only 14." For players like Wayne, age was a "get out of jail free" card they could use to avoid being held accountable to adult standards of behavior.

Similar to youth being perceived as immature, the elderly are perceived as enfeebled and held to lower expectations of expertise. Laura is a grandmother in her 60s whose children and grandchildren played World of Warcraft and was an active player herself. She occasionally played with her family members, but they were hardcore raiders and driven to excel in a way Laura was not interested in, so she spent most of her time playing with a second-generation guild that was only beginning to start raiding. Laura's character was a resto druid with high-level gear. Her character is a Healer class, which was in demand on the server, so she always had invitations to join group activities. Within her small guild, she was invited to every 10-man and 25-man raid that they attempted.

Although Laura was one of the top healers in the guild, she was treated differently by her guildmates because she was an elderly woman. They saved items of gear for her and slowed down explanations. Occasionally, they would just say "you don't have to worry about it" when Laura did not seem to understand a strategy, and they generally looked out for her. For example, Laura's guild had started exploring Naxxramas, a raid instance with multiple bosses similar to Karazhan, which included complicated boss

battles. One evening, the guild was attempting to defeat Thaddius. The Thaddius fight comes in two phases<sup>94</sup> and in-between the phases, the entire raid must leap from a platform surrounded by water onto a stage where Thaddius awaits. To successfully cross the water, players must time their jump so that their character leaps within one step of the edge. Jumping too soon or too late misses the stage and lands in the water where the player then has to run back to the entrance of the room to climb back onto the platform and try the jump again. As Laura's guild was preparing to start the Thaddius battle, a more experienced player walked the raid through the battle strategy, including the crucial timing of the jump between phases. While those directions were being given, the raid leader sent me a whisper<sup>95</sup>:

Greg: uve done this right?

Me: yep

Greg: if we dont make the jump wer screwtd

Me: yep. want me to levatate<sup>96</sup> someone?

Greg: ya. can u levatate [Laura]?

Me: kk

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<sup>94</sup> Detailed walkthroughs of this boss fight are available online, including <http://www.wowwiki.com/Thaddius>.

<sup>95</sup> Communication within a raid is often complex, mixing voice and text. Whispers between members of the raid are common in order to clarify comments, make inside jokes, or have a private discussion. VoIP is used for general announcements and discussions and is usually audible to the entire group. One raid group I ran with used two VoIP channels simultaneously so that officers could debate strategies and complain about other players without confusing or directly insulting the rest of the raid.

<sup>96</sup> Levitate is a Priest spell which "Allows the friendly party or raid target to levitate, floating a few feet above the ground. While levitating, the target will fall at a reduced speed and travel over water." (Priest User Interface, World of Warcraft, Blizzard, 2004).

Greg: I love her but shes [Laura]

Greg: no way she can do this

The raid leader was asking me to cast the spell “Levitate” on Laura between the first and second phases of the fight. This would mean that when Laura attempted the jump, she would gently float across the gap regardless of when she hit the jump button, and it would be very difficult for Laura to miss the jump with Levitate on her. Because a priest can cast only one Levitate at a time, the raid leader asked me to cast it on the player he thought was most likely to fail the jump. This brief exchange is an example of ways that Laura’s guildmates responded to her performance of age. They took steps to protect her from herself and to protect her from gaining the enmity of other players. At the same time, Laura chooses to play with a guild that lets her be herself, rather than playing with her family’s hardcore raiding guild.

More than just being old or young, performance of age is also enacted through acknowledging family relationships with other players within the game. World of Warcraft can be a very family friendly game. Husbands and wives played side by side in their homes. Grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren can all share a love of playing. Engaging in game activities with another person can be a bonding experience for players. For example, most of the players under 15 that I observed either played in groups with a parent or, like Wayne, were in the same guild. Sometimes, family would acknowledge their family connections – fathers and sons, sisters, or brothers – revealing their age or gender through these relationships and adding their familial role to their gamer identity.

An example was a father and son I met while questing in the Redridge Mountains, a low-level area. I had just reached an area where I could complete a number of quests, when I noticed two characters in the same area. One was a paladin class – a combination class that can both deal damage and absorb damage effectively. The other player was a priest class – someone who could deal damage and heal themselves and other players, but could not absorb very much damage. The two players were working together, so I assumed they must be grouped.<sup>97</sup> Knowing that there was a group quest<sup>98</sup> nearby, I sent a whisper to the paladin asking if they wanted to group with me for the quest. I received no immediate response, so I continued attacking giant spiders and angry buzzards to complete the quest I was working on. Several minutes later, I received a whisper from the priest apologizing for the lack of response from the paladin. “He’s my son. He’s only 3 years old.” This surprised me and I opened a dialogue with the priest about how he played World of Warcraft with such a young son. The father, his son and I played together for about an hour while we completed quests. The three-year-old son could neither type nor read typing – including the instructions within the game. However, the child delighted in attacking the animals and other fantasy creatures required for the quests and even knew to click on a defeated enemy to collect the loot. His father played with him, managed his interactions with other players, and, by playing a supporting class (priest), enabled his son to focus on attacking targets and not have to worry about health.

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<sup>97</sup> “Grouped” players work together to complete difficult tasks and share or split the benefits and the rewards.

<sup>98</sup> A group quest is designed to encourage social interaction through working together and is extremely difficult for one player to complete.

The son played on a computer next to his father, allowing his father to watch and respond to the game information on both of their screens. I was very impressed with the son's playing skills despite not being able to read instructions or respond to typed commands. More importantly, the father's online identity was connected to his son's. He was a gamer, playing the game, completing the quests, and leveling his character, but he was also performing fatherhood, both in the game and in the physical world.

Another intergenerational duo was Brian, a 12-year-old player, and his father. Brian was an excellent and dedicated player and most PUG players assumed he was much older than his 12 years. Brian and his father played in the same guild. One night, in the middle of an instance, Brian and his father's characters suddenly stopped moving and, after a few minutes, they started to hearth<sup>99</sup>. As their characters disappeared from the instance, Brian typed, "sorry" and "my moms having a baby" in Guild chat. Everyone in the guild started asking questions about the future sibling and Brian happily answered as his father's character logged out<sup>100</sup>. After about 15 minutes, Brian's father logged back in and apologized to the guild for leaving the instance in such a hurry and leaving the group two characters short. His guildmates told him not to worry and to get his wife to the hospital. After a few more apologies and comments about the impending birth, Brian and his father both logged off for the night. When he logged in the next day, Brian described how excited he was to have a baby sister. Both Brian and his father were sharing the excitement of the new baby with their guild friends. They brought the change in their

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<sup>99</sup> Each character starts the game with a Hearthstone, an item which allows the character to teleport to their home base once an hour. "Hearththing" is the term for when a character activates their Hearthstone.

<sup>100</sup> Players receive notifications when people on their friends list or in their guild login or logoff.

family into the game space and added “brother” or “new father” to their gamer identities. This also became part of their identity performance within the guild, because “the baby” became a reason for changing the amount of time they spent in the game and the kinds of activities in which they participated. By incorporating their family life into their gamer identities, they changed their relationship to other players by changing the expectations other players had about them.

### **Conclusion**

Social norms around gender, ethnicity, and age are not only physical characteristics, but also influence the how second-generation gamers develop their gamer identity. First- and second-generation players look for typed, verbal, and behavioral clues about other players’ identities, especially to determine a player’s levels of maturity and expertise. Second-generation gamers find it difficult to identify with the gamer stereotype and often find ways to pass as the stereotype and to circumvent gamer norms by creating safe enclaves where they can express their gender or ethnicity. As second-generation gamers explore World of Warcraft, they enact a performance of their personal gamer identity. This identity is an outward projection of who they are and who they want to be in the game space. In Chapter 4, I will explore how second-generation gamers respond to others’ identity performances and begin to consider themselves as part of a community.

## Chapter 4: Performing a Social Identity in an Online Community

World of Warcraft is a member of the MMO genre, with attributes like online play<sup>101</sup> and being a persistent world<sup>102</sup>. Unlike a video game which can be paused and progress saved, each World of Warcraft server hosts a lively community of players, each player contributing to the culture on that server. This chapter explores how second-generation players perform social identities through their contributions and responses to the community of players. The sections of this chapter are as follows:

- Evolving theories about online communities
- Online communities as a context for social identity performance
- Developing a social identity
- The compelling intimacy of social identity performance

### Evolving Theories about Online Communities

One of the key characteristics of second-generation gamers is that they are not steeped in gamer culture in contrast to first-generation gamers. First-generation gamers have history with technology. They've played console games and MMOs and even text-based MUD, MUSH, or MOOs<sup>103</sup>. They have spent hours in IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels or AOL chat rooms or discussion forums. First-generation gamers know that

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<sup>101</sup> In "online play," the player's computer must be connected to the Internet in order to play the game. The game is hosted on a remote server which the players login to, allowing synchronous interaction of the players within the game, visible on each player's individual computer.

<sup>102</sup> A "persistent world" describes a game or virtual world in which events progress whether a player is connected to the server or not.

<sup>103</sup> These are examples of online community platforms used to enable games and virtual spaces for social interaction. MUD means simultaneously a Multi-User Dungeon and Multi-User Domain, MUSH is commonly referred to as Multi-User Shared Hallucination or Multi-User Shared Hack, and MOO stands for MUD, Object Oriented.

there's another player behind every avatar, and that actions in the game setting, just like in the physical world, have social consequences. First-generation gamers are comfortable knowing that there is a community of like-minded game players out there who, regardless of the other things going on in their lives, make time to login and play and that their participation is essential to the health of the community and of the game.

From the beginning, researchers have been drawn to the seemingly spontaneous sense of community that develops in interactive online spaces. As technology has changed, so have researchers' understandings of what it means to be a citizen of an online community. Rheingold's (1993/2000) groundbreaking study of the text-based Whole Earth 'Lectric Link (WELL) online community stretched our understanding of what was possible through electronically mediated communication. "People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries" (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. xvii). Rheingold endorsed the idea that a genuine community with deeply personal connections could develop in cyberspace.

While Rheingold saw the authenticity of the community that developed in the WELL, Turkle (1995) saw online communities as an inspiring place of identity exploration. Community members were not limited by physical characteristics, but

instead, could play with alternate identities. Members could explore how other people treated them if they were a different gender, or age, or ethnicity. For examples, they could create a persona who was wickedly blunt, or one who mothered everyone and listened to their problems. Being part of an online community gave members a chance to realize aspects of their personality that might otherwise be suppressed behind layers of socialization.

As technologies for online communication improved, the cultures of online communities became more vibrant. Boellstorf (2008) conducted an ethnographic study of the graphical virtual world, Second Life (Linden Lab, 2004). He chose to treat Second Life as if it were a location he had traveled to as an anthropologist and explored the virtual space like he would have explored a physical space. Previous research had shown the depth of connections people can make in an online community, that they were “a place that people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms” (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. 12). For Boellstorf, the connection between virtual and physical-world identities was less interesting than identities which flourished within the culture of Second Life. He made no attempt to “meet Second Life residents in the actual world or learn their actual-world identities,” (Boellstorf, 2008, p. 61). It was enough that these personalities existed within the community. This is a key distinction for the study of virtual worlds – while an online community is filled with people who have identities in the physical world, online personae are a performance, much like a theater production, which can be examined as a performance within the confines of the performance space.

Fandom was a starting point for many online communities, and Taylor's (2006b) ethnographic exploration of players in the MMO Everquest (Sony Entertainment, 1999) was a first in-depth look at the community that develops within and around an MMO. Unlike other online communities, the culture of a video game is more defined and constrained by the structures of the game itself. As a contribution to online communities research, Taylor documented and explored the meaningful relationships that players develop with each other. As a contribution to game studies, Taylor showed how MMOs facilitate an online community with a strong culture. Like Turkle, Taylor explored questions of how players enacted their physical identities in the virtual world, but Taylor also explored how game structures constrained and developed social interaction.

Other researchers (cf. Chen, 2010; Nardi, 2010) followed in Taylor's footsteps, exploring the culture of MMO players. This dissertation explores how negotiating an individual identity is only one facet of identity performance. In World of Warcraft, individual players perform not only individual identities, but also social identities. These performed social identities shape the community as a whole. First-generation players have a strong sense of what it means to be part of the "gamer" community, as documented by previous researchers; however, second-generation players are still wrestling with what their social identity should be.

### **Online Communities as Contexts for Social Identity Performance**

#### **Experience with social interaction in online spaces.**

For most second-generation gamers, World of Warcraft was their first MMO, so they were unfamiliar with the culture and habits of MMO communities because their

exposure to them was limited. Second-generation gamers' understanding of an "online community" differs that of from first-generation players. Modern online communities are made possible by specific technologies – blog-hosting sites, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, FourSquare or YouTube, for some examples<sup>104</sup>. The "online community" that Rheingold imagined has splintered into many smaller online communities, aided by technologies like the ones mentioned, but not tied to them. Second-generation gamers, like many non-gamers, are members of multiple online communities. For example, just for their interest in World of Warcraft, second-generation gamers may also read the official World of Warcraft forums, or view the statistics of their characters on the WoW Armory<sup>105</sup>. In many cases, they've been told by other players to look up information about quests on WoWwiki, Wowhead, or Thottbot,<sup>106</sup> but they rarely add information to these third-party knowledge databases. Occasionally, they will explore fansites dedicated to their specific class<sup>107</sup>. They are quite likely to join a guild website or connect with their guild members on MySpace<sup>108</sup> or Facebook. They may also watch humorous videos about World of

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<sup>104</sup> Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) is a social-networking site originally associated with college students. LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com/>) is a career-oriented social networking site. Twitter (<http://twitter.com/>) is a status/micro-blogging information network focusing on "tweets" that are 140 characters or less. FourSquare (<https://foursquare.com/>) is a mobile application that allows users to interact using GPS-based location data. YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/>) is a video-sharing website.

<sup>105</sup> A website built by Blizzard Activision that displays character, gear, achievement, etc., information for each active character.

<sup>106</sup> WoWWiki (<http://www.wowwiki.com/Portal:Main>), Wowhead (<http://www.wowhead.com/>), and Thottbot (<http://thottbot.com/>).

<sup>107</sup> For examples, <http://shadowpriest.com/> is dedicated to the priest class, specifically with a skill specification to do damage, rather than to heal, while <http://www.resto4life.com/> is dedicated to the druid class, healing skill specification.

<sup>108</sup> Myspace (<http://www.myspace.com/>).

Warcraft on Youtube<sup>109</sup>, and possibly share them with friends. For second-generation gamers, their online community is a string of micro-communities in which they may or may not choose to become active participants and of which World of Warcraft is only a portion.

First-generation gamers, on the other hand, are likely to maintain a strong sense of community across technologies. They form guilds that move from game to game and build guild websites where members can share useful or fun information, as well as contribute to third-party knowledge databases. For first-generation gamers, it's less about a specific game, and more about the community they have developed within the game space. "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. xx). As documented repeatedly in game studies research, personal relationships are a key element of the MMO experience. The culture of first-generation gamers is built around the strong sense of community those personal relationships enable.

### **Performing social identity through audio participation.**

As with any culture, particular behaviors can be used to identify members. Many first- and second-generation World of Warcraft players use third-party voice-over-IP (VOIP) software when playing in groups<sup>110</sup>. It makes coordination easier and keeps the

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<sup>109</sup> As of November 27, 2011, a search of "World of Warcraft" on YouTube produced over 1 million hits.

<sup>110</sup> When raids used 40 people during Vanilla World of Warcraft, VOIP was a requirement for any serious raider. Later, Blizzard created an in-game voice chat system, but of such poor quality that most raiding guilds still used third-party software. Initially, access to and ability to use a VOIP distinguished first- and

fingers focused on character control rather than typing. As discussed previously, audio interaction can give a lot of information about the player's age or gender, but it also offers an entrance into the player's gaming space and home life. During a raid with VOIP, players are on the computer equivalent of a conference call and you often hear more than you intend. The microphones are normally on a "push to talk" setting, much like a walkie-talkie or CB handset and different players set the "push" button to different keyboard or mouse buttons, but you still get an audible picture of the space where the player is gaming. For example, one raiding group I played with for a while offered a wealth of audio information about their physical-world locations. Valerie, although she lived alone, often had friends and family talking in the background. You could hear her daughter playing *Rockband*<sup>111</sup> (Electronic Arts, 2007). Roger's mentally handicapped brother often played near where he was on the computer and you could sometimes hear him speaking to Roger and to himself. Owen's mic made him sound like he was in an echo chamber and we often tease him about being an astronaut, although he was usually connecting from hotel rooms because his job kept him travelling. On my mic, other players could frequently hear the sounds of police helicopters and emergency vehicles outside my apartment; people asked about them and then said "ohhh" knowingly when I said I lived in Los Angeles. These small clues add levels of intimacy to the social interactions that are mediated by game characters, text and VOIP.

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second-generation gamers, but VOIP became much more commonplace after the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion.

<sup>111</sup> *Rockband* is a console-based game where the players simulate instruments and create music.

It is easy to get a sense of the people you are playing with when you hear anger or excitement or sympathy in their voices. It is easy to think differently about them if they have an accent or sound very young, and easy to attribute negative qualities to players who do not participate in voiced discussions. Players who consistently do not have a mic or do not speak on VOIP have to work twice as hard to have their “voice” heard via text in group situations where conversational norms have taken over. Players who do not conform to the expected behaviors regarding VOIP may find their identity performance questioned or ridiculed. Some PUGs (pick-up groups) led by first-generation gamers will not invite anyone who does not have VOIP and will sometimes kick players out of the group who do not have mics. By not having a mic, the players are viewed by other players as not prepared to play the game seriously, or, even worse, that the mic-less player might have something to hide. Not engaging fully in the audio social interactions becomes a performance of an un-social identity, and therefore, unacceptable to first-generation players.

### **Performing social identity through quantifiable participation.**

First-generation players have clear, although implicit, guidelines for acceptable behavior. They understand the value of teamwork and feel no hesitation to point out when someone on the team is not pulling their weight (Brown & Thomas, 2008). Many raiding guilds use a data-collection mod<sup>112</sup> which tracks individual contributions to group

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<sup>112</sup> A “mod” is a program that modifies the player’s user interface (UI) to present game information in personalizable ways. “Much like how previous games such as Asheron’s Call allowed users to modify the UI, Blizzard has constructed its game system so that playerdevelopers can dramatically change not only the way it looks but indeed how the game is experienced and played. This means that UI modifications (mods) are not simply cosmetic but can provide core functionality to the game, even altering the nature of play itself. Some of the mods currently available allow you to do things like add special timers to your game

activities. “Damage meters are, as one might guess from their name, tools that calculate the amount of damage individual players are doing to opponents (either other players or nonplayer characters). They then typically visually represent this information in real time within the [user interface] and can also be output as text, complete with statistics and rankings. Damage meters can be a useful tool for players in showing them how they compare to others in their group or raid, often acting as a notification system in case they are doing too little or too much damage to an opponent. They can either be used privately—as when someone has one running and simply watches the tally to see their and others’ performance—or collectively, by publicizing the results in text to a chat channel” (Taylor, 2006a, pp. 326-327).

In describing the first-generation-gamer attitude about individual assessment, Brown and Thomas (2008) say, “Gamers like to be evaluated, even compared with one another, through systems of points, rankings, titles, and external measures. Their goal is not to be rewarded but to improve. Game worlds are meritocracies where assessment is symmetrical (leaders are assessed just as players are), and after-action reviews are meaningful only as ways of enhancing individual and group performance.” Lackluster individual performance is visible to the group, providing both individual incentive and social pressure to improve. Taylor (2006a) acknowledges that while “surveillance” mods like damage meters are quantitative, the third-party software may not accurately reflect every player’s contribution to a situation, e.g., the roles of some members of the team

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window so you can see when spells are fading, easily swap out gear and equipment with one click, and even instantly heal people if they get below a certain prespecified damage threshold” (Taylor, 2006a, p. 326).

may not be to do damage. However, the extensive use of these kinds of mods offers compelling data that supports Brown and Thomas' argument that stereotypical players thrive on transparency and internal competition in collaborative situations.

### **Performing social identity through good sportsmanship.**

First-generation players associate personality types with character classes, races, and factions, and are quick to label other players based on their behaviors. The initial interactions of players within an MMO are often focused on achieving a group goal, so the actions of a player can be telling about a person's character. In the age of LiveJournal, Wordpress<sup>113</sup>, MySpace, and Facebook and Twitter, consumers are familiar with creating an online presence and a representational "face" to show the world. In an online game like World of Warcraft, that "face" is represented not so much in the physical representations that people choose, but in other choices, such as character class, level, and gear. Even more expressive than selecting from choices pre-defined by the game, are the actions a player takes in different situations. At the heart of it, World of Warcraft is a game full of collaborative and competitive elements, and players can choose whether or not to "play nice." First-generation gamers can tell a lot about the person behind the character by how he/she responds at moments of choice – does she complain when someone else wins a piece of choice loot<sup>114</sup> in a random roll? Does he blame his mistake on another player?

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<sup>113</sup> LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>) and WordPress (<http://wordpress.com/>).

<sup>114</sup> "Loot" is a common term for any item dropped by a defeated enemy at the end of a fight. Usually these items are divvied up between group members according to their value/usefulness and random chance.

Taking measure of someone's moral fiber by playing a game with them is not a new idea. Stories about deals made on golf courses have abounded for years and the technique has migrated into the virtual world. The idea that World of Warcraft was "the new golf"<sup>115</sup> hit mainstream news in February of 2006 (Pinckard, 2006; Terdiman, 2006). Rodriguez (2006) expressed the correlation when he said, "WoW facilitates surprisingly rich social interactions between players. In WoW I've set up meetings, arranged introductions, even asked for a favor or two. All the things that used to happen at a country club can now occur in this online space, only with an order of magnitude more people and without the limitations of geography or tee times" (Rodriguez, 2006, ¶3). Playing a game with someone forces you to interact with that person in a consistent and specific way. "The most important – and honestly, most surprising – thing I've learned in WoW is how it forges genuine, we've-been-through-hell-together friendships.... Through WoW, I've come to trust these guys in the same way I trust my real-world collaborators." (Rodriguez, 2006, ¶5). First-generation players understand the social connectedness and trust that teamwork can develop during gameplay. Second-generation players find it "most surprising" that interaction with other players can be deeply personal.

### **Developing a Social Identity**

"I believe *World of Warcraft* is an exemplar of a new means of forming and sustaining human relationships and collaboration through digital technology" (Nardi,

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<sup>115</sup> The interviewee, Joi Ito, credited Cory Ondrejka with the first comparison between the social/professional uses of World of Warcraft and the game of golf (Ito, 2006). In that same blog post, Cory Ondrejka credits a discussion on the Terra Nova website started by Thomas Malaby (2006).

2010, p. 5). Second-generation gamers wrestle with the “realness” of the social ties that they develop online and with their willingness to immerse themselves in gamer culture. They do not have the same depth of history with online interactions as first-generation players. Second-generation players use email and social networking sites like MySpace or Facebook, but these interactions are generally with personal friends or with friends of friends, ties that still have some association to known relationships, unlike an MMO community. How second-generation gamers perceive other players in the online space has a significant impact on the player’s experience within the game.

**Keeping a ‘safe’ distance.**

In his often-quoted treatise on games and play, Huizinga (1950/2006) claims that between the cheater and the spoilsport, the latter is the worst of all offenders because he not only refuses to play by the rules, but he points out that the rules are arbitrary in the first place. This also extends to players who refuse to participate in the norms of gamer culture. For some second-generation players, MMOs are full of “gamers.” Although they play games, they do not identify as “gamers,” and they do not identify with the gamer community as a whole. These players downplay the significance of online interactions. At best, they place people met online in a separate, lesser category of friends or acquaintances. At worst, they pretend that other players are inconsequential and that online anonymity protects them from responsibility for their actions. For players who distance themselves from other people in the game, their sense of community membership is tenuous.

Unlike first-generation gamers who often play with their real life friends or with guilds that move together from game to game, a lot of second-generation gamers engage in the space as a separate world with a specific set of gaming friends. Some players keep their game playing secret from their “real” friends or family.

Samuel, a white, mid-twenties male, held a steady job as a construction engineer. He also played World of Warcraft for thirty to forty hours per week, which is not an insignificant amount of time; however, Samuel made a point of always telling other players he was unavailable for game-related activities on Friday nights because that was his “going out” time and people should not be playing a video game on a Friday night. He said that no one knew he played video games and he planned on keeping it that way. Samuel’s derogatory opinion of other video game players, especially those who play to the exclusion of any other form of socializing, is not uncommon among second-generation players. Many second-generation players cannot identify with the stereotype of the isolated, antisocial gamer. They are ashamed to tell friends, family, or coworkers that they play World of Warcraft in large part because second-generation players reject the assumptions that they and other people have about video game players.

Steven, a single man in his mid thirties, was a successful office manager within a large company. When he was transferred to manage a branch in a rural area, he was unhappy about the lack of entertainment for people his age, so he used World of Warcraft to supplement his social life. Steve was heavily involved in World of Warcraft, had multiple high-level characters, led raids, and spent a large amount of his free time in the game. He was extraordinarily flirtatious with female players in the game and had several

long-distance relationships that began online. Steven also played online console games, sometimes while conversing in VoIP software with other World of Warcraft players. On the surface, he had many characteristics of a first-generation gamer. On the other hand, he rejected the label, “gamer,” he vocally ridiculed hardcore players, and he did not play on nights he went “to the bar,” although he often logged in after a night out drinking. More importantly, like Samuel, none of his friends, family, or co-workers knew he played World of Warcraft. According to him, the relationships he had with people online, including being heavily involved in his game guild and engaging in intimate conversations with other players outside of the game, should be segregated from “real” life. In his mind, his achievements in the game were a result of his general overall ability to achieve, and his playing was only due to his circumstances, not his choice.

Ginny, a thirty-two-year-old female player who was married and expecting her first child, played World of Warcraft with and without her husband and also worked full time as a nurse. She also segregated her video game hobby from the rest of her life. This segregation became visible when she posted a status on Facebook (copied and pasted from another friend) requesting that her Facebook friends comment on how they had first met her. When friends from World of Warcraft mentioned meeting in the videogame, she posted that “oops,” some of her friends and family were going to find out that she played video games. Ginny’s perception of Facebook was that it was full of her “real” friends and family. She had forgotten that she had included World of Warcraft friends on her “friends list” causing her membership in that online community to become transparent to the rest of her life.

Will was a Texan in his mid-thirties who used World of Warcraft as social time. He had a full time job, went to the gym three to four times a week and had a fiancée that he saw regularly, so he successfully maintained the social ties with which gamers supposedly struggle. Although he was a social man, he did not play World of Warcraft with his physical-world friends but treated it like another world with an entirely different set of friends.

One of the key reasons that Will played World of Warcraft was to meet girls. In his personal life, he had a tempestuous relationship with his fiancée and used any “off ” time to date and sleep with other women. He justified that this was not cheating because he and his fiancée were not officially together at the times he had slept with those other women. Interactions in World of Warcraft, however, were an even better opportunity for him to safely connect with females for sexual conversations and, at least once, to arrange to meet for sex. It seems unusual to think of the male-oriented World of Warcraft as a place to pick up women, but perhaps Will’s success is a good indication of the changing demographics of video game players. When he talked about his interactions in World of Warcraft, Will was at the same time dating and eventually engaged to his fiancée. In his mind, cybersex, flirting, innuendo, phone sex or anything like that did not “count” as long as it happened in World of Warcraft. He saw it as a safe outlet for his sexual frustrations and urges, with no long-term repercussions. When I asked if he thought it was cheating, he adamantly said “no”. When I asked if his fiancée would think it was cheating, he hesitated and hedged before finally saying that she probably would, but she would never know.

Beyond the embarrassment of his physical-world friends discovering he was a gamer, Will had a strong incentive to keep World of Warcraft separate from the rest of his life. One way this manifested was through his scheduled activities in the game. As much as Will enjoyed indulging in the World of Warcraft community, he was very strict about the amount of time he spent playing World of Warcraft. As a raid leader, he would schedule raids for two-hour blocks of time, rather than focusing on progression. No matter how much, or how little, the raid had accomplished, after two hours, the raid was ended. This was unusual because large-party raids in World of Warcraft require a significant amount of time in order to achieve goals. First-generation gamers not only dedicate these large amounts of time, but tend to think about raids in terms of accomplishment as well as time block so that there are specific goals that are attained by the party during the raid event. It is not that first-generation gamers ignore time, but that raid events are generally organized in terms of tasks to be accomplished. For example, a raid on a specific instance might be organized based on the number of bosses the raid anticipates defeating. Will, on the other hand, demonstrated a second-generation approach to raiding, where the raid was about engaging in the activity with other people rather than accomplishing a specific task. In a first-generation raid, it would be very unusual to be one trash pull<sup>116</sup> away from a boss fight<sup>117</sup> and end the raid because of a

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<sup>116</sup> As mentioned previously, a “pull” is to initiate a fight with a group of opponents. The term “trash” refers to the lower-level mobs who will join in on a boss fight if they have not been defeated before initiating battle with the boss.

<sup>117</sup> A “boss fight” is a longer, more complicated battle with a much stronger opponent. Each boss fight has unique elements and first-generation raiders thrill at finding the key strategy that will defeat the boss in the fastest time.

time deadline. For Will, game play is structured around the number of hours he has allotted to himself for play. When asked about this near fetishism of scheduling his gameplay time, Will replied that he did not want to spend too much time playing so that he had time to do the other things that he needed to do: “Gotta keep [my fiancée] happy.”

For these second-generation players, it was important that their social identity in World of Warcraft be distinct from their social identity in the physical world. By keeping a distance between themselves and the World of Warcraft community they had freedom to enter and enjoy the community without struggling to explain the discrepancies between their personal identity and the first-generation gamer stereotypes. Gaming was a hobby, rather than an identity, a guilty pleasure rather than a source of pride. From a first-generation-player perspective, where the community of players is paramount, this artificial distance from other players denies an essential part of the gameplay experience.

#### **(Re)Creating an authentic self.**

Unlike players who distance themselves from the community, some second-generation players behave as though online social interactions are simply offline interactions in a mediated form. These players endeavor to express their identity to other players the same way they would if they were face to face. Their social identity performance is contingent on the perceived authenticity of their membership within the community, and how believable other players find their personal identity performance. These second-generation players may not bring World of Warcraft to their everyday lives, but they certainly bring their everyday lives to the game. For many of these players, the specifics of the game is less important than the community of players. This is similar

to Rheingold's (1993/2000) description of the social interactions in an online community: "Participating in a virtual community has not solved all of life's problems for me, but it has served as an aid, a comfort, and an inspiration at times; at other times, it has been like an endless, ugly, long-simmering family brawl" (p. 9).

What differentiates these "authentic self" second-generation players from first-generation players is not how the second-generation players interact with the community, but how they interact with the game. First-generation players have a strong sense of community, but they are also competitively playing the game. If a player is not contributing to the group, for example, as documented by damage-meter mods, the other players may work with this player to help him improve, or ask her to switch to a different role, or perhaps cut him from the raid roster – much like a competitive sports team. Second-generation players are more focused on the social interactions and just "having a good time," like an amateur sports league that accepts any players regardless of ability. This second-generation disposition is expressed in many ways for "authentic self" second-generation players. For example, Caroline is a guild leader of a 100+ member casual raiding guild<sup>118</sup>. She prides herself on being the motherhen for her guild, offering a shoulder to lean on and advice on a variety of topics. In return, she often uses guild time to complain about her frustrations with her career, men, and her son. She calls her guild a family and treats it like such, being playful at times and temperamental at other times. Anyone who does not want this intimate relationship with Caroline is welcome to switch

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<sup>118</sup> A "casual raiding" guild is similar to an amateur-league sports team. Membership is generally based on interest rather than competitive tryouts, and, while winning is nice, most members enjoy just playing the game. Friction often develops when players expect a casual raiding guild to behave (or succeed) like a hardcore raiding guild.

to another guild, although she will, of course, contact any player who “gquits”<sup>119</sup>, wanting to know how they could possibly leave her happy little family.

A player’s willingness to contribute their authentic selves to the community creates a rich sense of depth in the online space. People are themselves, their characters, and also the online personality that they create. “CMC [computer-mediated communication] is a way to *meet* people, whether or not you feel the need to affiliate with them on a community level. It’s a way of both making contact with and maintaining a distance from others” (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. 11). Some players take their online interactions into the physical world. Deeply emotional friendships and romantic relationships have been a part of electronic mediated communication since the telegraph (Standage, 1998/2007).

Ralph and Katie are an example the depth of romantic connections that can develop in the game space when players try to create authentic social identities. Ralph was a retired military man in his mid-thirties. He was estranged from his ex-wife who lives in another state with his two children. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, which disturbed his sleep and kept him awake most nights. When the nightmares woke him up in a cold sweat, World of Warcraft offered a pleasant distraction full of people he could talk to at any hour. For Ralph, the World of Warcraft community was like a family. He was fiercely loyal to in-game friends and to his guild although his excessive bravado often rubbed other players the wrong way. In the public channels, he

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<sup>119</sup> Typing “/gquit” in the game immediately cancels a player’s membership in a guild. In addition, “/gkick [player name]” removes other members from the guild if you are an officer with permissions. These terms quickly became action verbs.

was loud<sup>120</sup>, brash, and generally leapt before he looked, and he did not work well with large groups; however, his one-on-one interpersonal interactions were much more thoughtful and his loneliness was very apparent.

Katie was a mid-twenties girl with little formal education and few career prospects. Her longest steady job had been a menial position in food service. She came home from work every day and logged into World of Warcraft where she had developed close ties to her guild and gaming friends. When Ralph joined her guild, there was at first some friction with his outspokenness, but eventually Katie and Ralph developed a friendship and began spending long hours talking and playing the game together. News that they were dating was met with a wide range of responses within the guild. Some of the members were happy for the couple. Some felt that online dating was not real dating, and an online relationship would not be real until the people met in person. Still others, who knew the personalities of Ralph and Katie, were surprised that the two were compatible. A few were merely concerned with how their relationship might affect guild dynamics.<sup>121</sup>

Eventually, Katie flew to visit Ralph and they met in person. Afterward, they continued dating long-distance until Katie abruptly packed up her belongings and moved in with Ralph. Initially, they both continued playing World of Warcraft, but eventually they drifted away from the game. By the time they got married, they had moved on to

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<sup>120</sup> Because this is a text-based channel, “loud” refers to both the frequency with which he participate in and antagonizes conversations and also his penchant for typing in all caps, the textual equivalent of shouting.

<sup>121</sup> For example, couples generally want to play together, meaning that both members of a couple must be included in group activities, regardless of their playing ability or character class.

other hobbies; however, they kept in touch with their former guildmates via FaceBook and are currently expecting their first child.

Ralph and Katie's relationship and those of other couples who met through World of Warcraft, are an example of the deep connections with another human being that can develop through gameplay. These second-generation gamers invested themselves into their interactions with other people in the game space. During the time when World of Warcraft was a central part of their lives, both Ralph and Katie logged in every day. Katie played around her work schedule and occasionally logged in during breaks at work in order to chat with her friends. Ralph logged in constantly, day or night, while he was looking for work and even after he had found a job with the city. World of Warcraft offered many second-generation players a social support group, a community with similar interests and, eventually, love and family.

### **The Compelling Intimacy of Social Identity Performance**

While collecting data for this dissertation, I was purposefully truthful in my personal and social identity. When asked, I never hid my gender, age, marital status or my academic reasons for being a participant observer. Like many second-generation players, I emphasized the authenticity of my identity in the game space, and, for the most part, I was presented with authentic identities in return. Like Boelstorff's (2008) ethnography of Second Life, I was less interested in verifying offline identities and more interested in the compelling performance of personal and social online identities.

During a visit to Tokyo, I spent about an hour each evening in my hotel room playing and chatting with other players in World of Warcraft. The timing roughly

translated to mid-morning in the U.S. The reactions I received to my comment that I was currently in Japan were mixed. Most people thought it was so cool that I was talking to them from Tokyo (including voice discussions with a headset and mic on VoIP). Others said, “Why the hell are you on WoW when you’re in Tokyo?”<sup>122</sup> I felt both perspectives myself, but the truth was that, after a day of strangeness, culture shock, learning new ways of doing things, a foreign language, and extreme sensory overload, it was comforting to relax in the hotel room with a shower and to spend some time in a familiar, albeit online, setting before going to bed.

#### **The support of a social networking site.**

Online video games, like other virtual communities, create the potential for deeply meaningful social connections. Second-generation gamers often find this aspect of game playing to be a startling revelation. One of the elements of “video game addiction” (see Chapter 5) that existing research and news stories fail to take into account is the social need that an online video game like World of Warcraft can fill for its players. Many players use World of Warcraft for therapeutic purposes. I repeatedly heard personal stories of the mental and physical challenges that the players faced in the physical world. World of Warcraft, both because of its digital interface and its goal-oriented structure made it easier for them to socialize and make friends.

Brian and Margaret are both more than twice the average age of a video game player. They play World of Warcraft along with their middle-aged son and their grandchildren. Brian does not raid, does not group and rarely talks to players outside of

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<sup>122</sup> “WoW” or “wow” is an abbreviation for World of Warcraft.

his guildmates. He likes to putter around in the game, completing a quest or two in whatever location he finds himself. Brian's son often logs into his account to level Brian's characters or gather items in the game for crafting, which moves Brian's character to new areas without the sense of "growing" a character that most players experience. During the time I played with his guild, Brian was diagnosed with cancer. The surgery and radiation treatments left him nauseous, exhausted and a restless sleeper. World of Warcraft offered a pleasant distraction. Brian kept his laptop in bed with him or by his favorite easy chair so he could login at any time of day or night, play for an hour or so and then go back to sleep. During these brief bouts of activity, I would have long conversations with him about a variety of subjects, including his disease. To his family he was always resolute and optimistic that he would beat the cancer. However, in the safety of cyberspace he spoke about the pain and his fears about the operation and radiation. World of Warcraft was a comfortable space where he could vent with impunity or retreat to for the small pleasure that completing simple quest goals could bring amidst the unknown outcome of his disease. It was both a place of consistency in his uncertain world and a way to reach out to friends from his sickbed.

Brian's wife, Margaret, also suffered poor health. When she was not spending time entertaining the grandkids or looking after Brian, she would park herself in front of her computer and play World of Warcraft. Margaret's characters were also leveled and stocked by her son, although infrequently. Margaret liked to wander around the map of the world, exploring all the different locations within the game. She did not pay any

attention to level progression<sup>123</sup> so she spent a lot of time as a ghost<sup>124</sup> running to find the corpse of her character killed by monsters because she was in an area too high for her character to handle. To Margaret, it was more fun to explore and chat with people from her guild than to level, complete quests or attempt any of the game goals that are built into the game structure.

For both Brian and Margaret, World of Warcraft was an easily accessible, interactive social networking site. They could reach out to people when they were hurting or lonely, at any time of the day or night, for as long as they wanted. Their guild was their online and offline family – made up only of a group of trusted friends and family who were all on a first-name basis, a rarity among even “authentic self” second-generation players. World of Warcraft filled their need for both entertainment and socialization and helped them through a difficult time in their lives.

### **The support of an anonymous confessional.**

Poor health is not the only reason that players turn to the World of Warcraft community for support. Many second-generation gamers admitted to mental health issues. Of the 104 interviewees:

- 83 (80%) subjects struggled with frequent bouts of insomnia.

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<sup>123</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, World of Warcraft is laid out so that low-level “newbie” areas are separate from higher-level areas. During the leveling process, roughly every 10 levels, the characters move from the newbie areas up through high level areas.

<sup>124</sup> When a player dies in World of Warcraft, they can either be “rezzed” by another player or release their spirit whereby they become a ghost at the nearest graveyard. In ghost form, the vibrant graphics of the game change to a foggy black and white world through which the player must run their ghost back to be reunited with their character’s body. If the character was killed by a game mob, the mob will most likely still be in the vicinity of the corpse and “rezzing” near it may cause additional deaths.

- 5 former or active military service men said they were suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).
- 22 subjects brought up in conversation that they were seeing or had recently seen a mental health professional.
- 7 subjects had been diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder and several struggled with the costs and side-effects of their prescribed medication.
- 16 suffered from ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and 5 discussed different medications they had tried.
- 10 had physical limitations which kept them from more active entertainments, including poor health, obesity, and pregnancy.
- 5 were prone to panic attacks in public settings.

Overwhelmingly, these players described World of Warcraft as safe, fun, and understandable. They liked the clear goals and rewards of the quest system. They liked the controlled interactions with other players – especially the ability to /ignore<sup>125</sup> people who disrupted their gameplay experience. World of Warcraft offered them an alternate opportunity to fulfill their social needs in a low-risk setting.

During the time I was collecting data, several of the interviewees went through the physical and emotional upheaval of relationship breakups and divorces. Through the turmoil of change, World of Warcraft remained a constant for many of them – a few people played World of Warcraft with their former partner and therefore quit the game

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<sup>125</sup> Many game commands in World of Warcraft can be accessed through the text interface by typing “/” followed by the command. “/ignore [name]” adds the named character to an “ignore” list. You no longer see comments from or actions performed by that particular player.

while ending their relationship, although at least one member of the couple usually remained. The majority increased the amount of time they spent playing World of Warcraft. This may be to fill social time previously spent with their ex-partner, or to promote more social interaction in general. These individuals generally found both a willing ear to vent about their relationship problems and support while healing and moving on.

The illusion of anonymity in World of Warcraft also makes it a space for confessions. I say illusion because, unlike a chatroom which might be logged into with a new account every night, World of Warcraft players have reputations, guilds, and friends connected to each character. The player may feel protected by the mediated forms of communication, but their social identity relies on the discretion of their conversation participants when they begin a confession.

During interviews, six of the male subjects talked about having been the victims of a past sexual assault from another man. This information was spontaneously offered, rather than solicited by me in the course of my research. These conversations took place in private “whispers”<sup>126</sup> or on VoIP software where the informant and I were the only participants. I believe that these confessions resulted in part because I am female. The video game space can be hypermasculine and homophobic – a “boys club” where sexual innuendos and crude humor are frequent (Burrill, 2008; Leonard, 2006). Meeting a sympathetic female in the game space who was asking personal questions created an

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<sup>126</sup> The “whisper” command seems private because it is visible only on the sender and receiver’s screens; however, this privacy is superficial since all text-based correspondence within the game goes through unsecured Internet communication and is stored on the game server.

opening for this type of interaction and allowed them to give voice to a shameful, taboo subject.

These confessions are exemplars of the power of an online community allowing players to make meaningful and compelling connections. More than just a place for people who all have the same hobby, World of Warcraft, like the virtual communities before it (Rheingold, 1993/2000) allows participants to connect with other people in emotionally satisfying ways. A player's social identity is situated within the strength of connections she feels to the online community and to its other members. Performing an authentic identity is not about imposing their physical-world identities on the game space, but about sharing authentic pieces of themselves with people they had grown to trust through the shared experience of gameplay. For these victims, baring a piece of their soul was the ultimate commitment to their relationship with other players in the space.

### **Conclusion**

Identity performance in an online space is about more than just the creation and maintenance of an online identity, but about the social connections that players make within an online community. With little online community experience outside of social-networking sites, second-generation players struggle to stretch their understanding of who they are and how to behave in an MMO community. They stumble over first-generation norms and expectations about technology use and in-game behaviors. In response, second-generation players lean toward either keeping other players at a protective distance, or recreating an authentic self within the community. Those who engage in the community often find the compelling social interactions described by first-

generation players and online communities researchers. Despite feeling disconnected from the gamer stereotype, and not engaging in end-game raiding or other aspects of first-generation gameplay, second-generation players create a social identity that fits their goals and needs. Whether they treat the World of Warcraft community like an entertainment space, a dating service, a family, a social networking site, or a confessional, second-generation players make the same kinds of strong social connections enjoyed for years by first-generation players.

## **Chapter 5: Negotiating with the “Addictive” Characteristics of Online Games**

The earlier chapters of this dissertation identified the gaming disposition of second-generation gamers, and explored how second-generation gamers perform individual and social gamer identities. In this chapter, I will delve deeper into a label often associated with gaming—addiction.

This chapter has the following sections:

- Digital games are increasingly accessible
- Research on digital game “addiction”
- Representations of the “Addicted Gamer” in popular culture
- Second-generation gamers and the third-person effect
- Second-generation player responses to “addiction”
- The hidden cost of “addiction” as a framework

The goal of this chapter is to explore how second-generation gamers talk about and respond to the rhetoric of digital game “addiction,” and how they approach and manage the reality of spending time playing digital games. Lastly, I explore how “addiction” is not a useful framework for understanding second-generation gameplay choices.

### **Digital Games are Increasingly Accessible**

In the same manner as the gamer identity and the online community, the discourse of digital game addiction developed within first-generation gamer culture. Second-generation gamers are bombarded with media reports of the negative consequences of playing digital games, including anti-social behavior and addiction. At the same time, the

digital game industry is booming with more advertising, more entertainment-dedicated hardware, and more players than ever before. Faced with negative images and terms like “addiction,” second-generation gamers still choose to start playing an expensive and time-consuming game like World of Warcraft. Technological, economic and social changes along with changes to the game structure have facilitated this second-generation of gamers (Kelly, 2011c).

Modern advancements in technology have made digital games more available to people than ever before. Computers—the platform of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs)—are becoming cheaper, faster, and more powerful. Internet access has spread across America and faster broadband Internet connections are increasingly more common than slower dial-up connections (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010). There are more computers in the home and these computers are entry-points for other forms of technology (Williams, 2006). In addition, digital games and other software programs no longer require specialized technical knowledge to install and run. They have become easier to install and manage, making them accessible to more people.

Digital games also offer economical entertainment. A subscription-based game like World of Warcraft offers as many hours of playtime per month as you choose for a monthly fee ranging from \$12.99-\$14.99 per month (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010a). Compare this with a single movie ticket which offers entertainment for only a few hours: “The average ticket price at theaters in the U.S. last year rose to an all-time annual high of \$7.89, up 5% from \$7.50 in 2009, according to the National Assn. of Theatre Owners. In the fourth quarter, the average price was \$8.01, up 5% from the year-ago period”

(Verrier, 2011, para. 1). In the uncertain post-9/11 economy, the monthly cost of World of Warcraft offers great value for the dollar.

Digital games are no longer the social pariah they used to be. While the “stereotype” of the digital game player remains, digital game demographics have expanded. The industry-owned website, The Entertainment Software Association (ESA), annually publishes statistical data about digital game players and purchasers. While these statistics need to be considered in context – members of the ESA have a commercial interest in shaping these statistics – they suggest that players are more numerous and more diverse in terms of gender and age than any time previously (ESA, 2010). “Sixty-seven percent of homes in America own either a console and/or PC used to run entertainment software.” (ESA, 2010, Industry facts: Game player data). Williams (2006) suggests that increased income, especially from females participating in the workforce, mixed with less time for entertainment have driven Americans to look for easy fun. Digital games have become more socially acceptable as a form of entertainment.

Lastly, World of Warcraft itself has undergone numerous expansions and patches from its initial release in November of 2004 that has made it easier for second-generation gamers to play. Repeatedly the expansions and patches made major changes to the GUI (graphical user interface), making it easier for players to locate and interact with objects, quests, and NPCs (non-player characters) within the game. Other examples of “dumbing down” the game include changing the leveling criteria for levels 20-60, “with less experience needed per level in that range as well as higher quest experience rewards for quests levels 30-60” (patch 3.2.0) and reducing the required level for beneficial talents

and skills, like making a riding mount<sup>127</sup> available at level 20 instead of level 40 (patch 3.2.0). The graphical and structural changes to the game have lowered the entry threshold for new players making it easier to become proficient enough at the game to pass previously difficult challenges.

From a purely commercial perspective, the technological, economic, social and game structure changes have made World of Warcraft more accessible to play. Second-generation gamers found more reasons to play than they did to be concerned about the potential “addictive” characteristics of a massively multiplayer online digital game.

### **Research on Digital Game “Addiction”**

With so many people entering into the digital game space, digital game “addiction” is a buzz word among main stream media and academia alike. Many digital games now take advantage of Internet connectivity to interact with other people on a more massive scale than two-player games, and modern home computers and console game systems or portable devices currently incorporate online playing features. It is difficult to provide an exhaustive list of current studies on digital game addiction in part because the terminology used to describe “when someone spends too much time playing digital games” is inconsistent. Not only is there disagreement on whether the addiction is to “video games,” “computer games,” “digital games,” “cyber-games,” or “online gaming,” but as games shifted online, researchers and the media started to associate

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<sup>127</sup> A riding mount dramatically decreases travel time and increases the efficiency of questing.

digital games as a form of “Internet addiction.” Internet addiction<sup>128</sup> itself goes by a variety of names such as pathological Internet use (Davis, 2001), problematic Internet use (Caplan, 2003), Internet addiction (Young, 1998), technological addiction (Griffiths, 1995) and Internet abuse (Morahan-Martin, 2005).

Centralized research on digital game addiction is also hindered because, like the Game Studies field itself, the research spans many disciplines – such as psychology, addiction, game studies, human-computer interaction, media studies, etc. This impacts second-generation gamers in two ways: News stories concerning digital game addiction appear periodically as studies within different disciplines are released, and the media stories are disjointed and lack consensus. The concept of having an “addiction” to online communication technologies is still a controversial phenomenon (Caplan, Williams & Yee, 2009; Charlton & Danforth, 2007; Chiu, Lee, & Huang, 2004; O’Brien, 2010). The controversy centers around comparing a psychological compulsion – where you *want* to do something – with a chemical dependence where your physiology needs a drug to function. The American Psychological Association (APA) debated adding “non-substance addictions, such as Pathological Gambling and Internet Addiction” to the upcoming fifth edition of their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2010, frequently asked questions). Charles P. O’Brien, MD, PhD, and chair of the Substance-Related Disorders Work Group of the APA commented that while there may be some connection between activating the reward system in the brain and a conditioned

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<sup>128</sup> For overviews of Internet addiction research, see Morahan-Martin (2007, 2008), Griffith and Davies (2005), and Byun, Ruffini, Mills, Douglas, Niang, Stepchenkova, Lee, Loutfi, Lee, Atallah and Blanton (2009).

reflex, the APA is not prepared to add Internet Addiction as a new diagnosis at this time, although they welcome further research on the topic (O'Brien, 2010).

Internet addiction, like digital game addiction, has been linked to increased depression and lower social competence (Davis, 2001; Kubey, Lavin & Barrows, 2001; Leung & Lee, 2005; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Ng & Weimer-Hastings, 2005) and is invoked when media users “become hooked” by the “habit-forming nature of the Internet” (Young, 2004, pp. 402-403). One of the symptoms of Internet addiction is overuse of the medium (Young, 1998, 2004). Young, one of the initial researchers on Internet addiction and founder of the Center for Online and Internet Addiction, states that, “although time is not a direct function in diagnosing Internet addiction, addicts generally are excessive about their online usage, spending anywhere from 40 to 80 hours per week, with sessions that could last up to 20 hours” (2004, p. 405).

The studies of the negative impacts of Internet addiction have been inconclusive (Morahan-Martin, 2005; Southwell & Doyle, 2004). Caplan, Williams and Yee (2009) found that digital game playing had a minimal impact on problematic Internet usage. Southwell and Doyle (2004) in their review of computer/video game research, discuss and refute many of the presumed negative effects of digital game playing, including time-use arguments, stating that, “individual motivation for game playing or individual capacity for immersion should both play an important role in moderating any main-effect relationship” (p. 393).

### **Representations of the “Addicted Gamer” in Popular Culture**

When second-generation gamers enter World of Warcraft, they have already been bombarded with news coverage of academic studies and congressional hearings on the effects of digital games. Their attitudes about digital game playing have been shaped by stories of spectacular cases of spousal neglect (e.g. Alter, 2007), failing school (e.g. Jacobs, 2010) and unhealthy media use (e.g. Mollman, 2008). Even more telling, digital game “addiction” has become the basis for characters in popular culture.

The stereotype of the game-addicted, adolescent, white male gamer discussed in Chapter 3 is celebrated, caricaturized and incorporated into popular culture. An example includes the newspaper comic strip, Foxtrot, which ran several series of strips where Jason, the teenage male character, plays the fictitious game, “World of Warquest,”<sup>129</sup> addressing concerns such as anonymity – a helpful player in the game was actually a girl (his school nemesis, Eileen Jacobson) – and addiction – Jason’s mother repeatedly asked him to stop playing for meals, sleep, and school (Amend, 2006). Digital-game-obsessed players are more negatively portrayed as offenders on episodes of Law and Order: SVU (“Game,” originally aired February 8, 2005) where the gamers are “unable to distinguish fantasy from reality” (IMDB<sup>130</sup>, episode description) or CSI: Miami (“Urban Hellraisers,”<sup>131</sup> originally aired November 21, 2005) where college students act out

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<sup>129</sup> This name is meant to evoke a relationship to both Blizzard Entertainment’s World of Warcraft and Sony’s earlier Everquest series, both members of the online games genre known as massively multiplayer role-playing games.

<sup>130</sup> Internet Movie Database description available at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0629657/>

<sup>131</sup> The name “Urban Hellraisers” may be a reference to the popular Grand Theft Auto series published by Rockstar Games which has become known for including violent and sexual assaults as part of the game.

scenes from a violent digital game and another of the players is found dead from a heart attack after playing the game non-stop for 60 hours while consuming caffeine drinks (IMDB<sup>132</sup>). These examples are not an exhaustive list of representations of the “addicted gamer” stereotype in popular culture, but they capture the essence of how the stereotype plays out in both comedic and dramatic fictional frames.

Closely tied with the stereotype of the game-addicted, *adolescent*, white, male gamer is the stereotype of the game-addicted, *middle-aged* gamer with no job and no social skills. A series that never misses a chance to poke fun at stereotypes, the cartoon television show *South Park* (Parker, 2006), released an episode which caricatures both representations of gamers. Created in conjunction with Blizzard Entertainment employees, *South Park* episode 1008, “Make Love, Not Warcraft,” which originally aired on October 4, 2006, partially took place within the *World of Warcraft* game. In the episode, “there’s trouble in the online gaming world when a mad gamer won’t play by the rules. The boys dedicate their lives to defeating the renegade and saving the *World of Warcraft*” (Comedy Central, Season 10, Episode 8, episode description). While playing *World of Warcraft* together, the main cast of characters is attacked by a single player who, mysteriously, has broken the game mechanics that prevent players from randomly killing each other in low-level areas. As the startled characters are killed one-by-one in the game, Stan exclaims, “Whoever he is, he is one tough badass.”<sup>133</sup> The cartoon then cuts to a picture of an overweight, balding, long-haired man in front of his computer

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<sup>132</sup> Internet Movie Database description available at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0534850/>

<sup>133</sup> All quotes are cited directly from the audio track of the episode, currently available at <http://www.southparkstudios.com/guide/episodes/s10e08-make-love-not-warcraft>

screen. The front view (Figure 2) shows a middle-aged man, unshaven and with skin blemishes, intently staring at the screen, playing on his matching keyboard and computer which both glow ominously with red LED-lit designs. His room is messy, littered with dirty laundry, plastic figurines, cans of Rockstar caffeine drinks and an empty pizza box.

In the cartoon, worried Blizzard employees meet to discuss this player who is rampaging across their game. Humorously, but also in a way that completes the stereotype of the older, anti-social gamer, the “Blizzard President” pronounces, “Whoever this person is, he has played World of Warcraft nearly every hour of every day for the past year and a half. Gentlemen, we are dealing with someone here who... has absolutely no life.” Reinforcing that all gamers have “no life,” the character Cartman calculates the time it will take the cast to level characters high enough to combat the renegade player. “7 weeks, 5 days, 13 hours and 20 minutes, giving ourselves 3 hours a night to sleep. What do you say guys? You can just... You can just hang outside in the sun all day tossing a ball around, or you can sit at your computer and do something that matters.” This motivational speech is followed by a musical montage of the cast obsessively playing World of Warcraft at home and school, forgoing eating and sleeping. In typical South Park scatological style, Cartman even goes to the bathroom in a bedpan held by his mother, rather than leave his computer. Meanwhile, their “real” cartoon characters morph into grossly overweight, pale, pimply versions (Figure 3), completing the transformation into “gamers” proficient enough to defeat the renegade player.

This episode of South Park visually caricaturizes the discourse of digital-game addiction. The antagonist’s sole interest is to be a griefer, defeating other players and

ruining their playing experience. For the sake of comedy, the griefer breaks the technical laws of the game, as well as breaking the social norms of gamer culture so that he terrorizes player and developer alike. Meanwhile, the main characters of the show obsess about their avatars and about saving the game while grossly neglecting their health and other obligations. These representatives of “digital game addiction” are grotesque and antisocial. Second-generation players find it difficult to identify with these extreme stereotypes.

### **Second-Generation Gamers and the Third-Person Effect**

One explanation for why second-generation gamers are willing to try digital games, despite the stories and images of digital game “addiction,” is because they feel forewarned, and therefore, “addiction” could never happen to them. This is a phenomenon associated with media consumption called the third-person effect. The theory of the third-person effect as first introduced by Davidson (1983) contends that individuals perceive that *other* people are more likely to be influenced by negative media effects than they are themselves. The third-person effect has been found in both perceptions of negative media influence and in changes in users’ behavior in response to those perceptions (Chia, Lu and McLeod, 2004; Hoffner et al., 2001; Huh, Delorme and Reid, 2004; Peiser & Peter, 2000; Perloff, 2002). Duck, Hogg, and Terry (1998, 1999) and Reid & Hogg (2005) suggested a self-categorization explanation for third-person perceptions. Self-categorization is when individuals see a greater effect from media on strangers than on “comparison others” with whom they self-identify (similar to Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod’s, 1999, social distance). Reid and Hogg (2005)

describe the self-categorization explanation as an effective means for explaining “when particular identities become salient as the basis for social perception and behavior” (p. 131). The self-categorization explanation suggests that, in general, the strength of third-person perceptions of negative media effects inversely correlates with how similar the individuals consider themselves to the comparison other, in regards to a medium that is either normative or non-normative for themselves or for the other. In other words, if I think I am similar to someone else, then I think we both will respond similarly to a magazine that we are likely to read, however, if I think we are more different from each other, then I think the other person is more likely to be negatively influenced by that magazine. To test the self-categorization theory, Reid and Hogg involved the use of stereotypes. For example, they found that undergraduates believed “trailer trash” to be much more influenced by *The National Enquirer* than they were, and that this third-person effect was lowered the more similar the participants rated themselves to “trailer trash.” Using Reid & Hogg’s framework, Kelly (2005) had subjects compare themselves to a “typical computer game player” and found greater third-person perceptions toward addiction to excessive game playing versus people who did not consider themselves to be gamers. In other words, if a person did not identify with being a “typical computer game player,” then he thought that a gamer was more likely to be addicted to games than they were. On the other hand, if the person thought she was similar to a “typical computer game player,” she thought they would respond about the same. Schmierbach, Boyle, Xu, and McLeod (2011) published similar findings.

### **Second-Generation Player Responses to “Addiction”**

Many second-generation game players deny the label “gamer,” and therefore are likely to consider themselves not at risk for “addiction.” At the same time, playing an online digital game can be fun and socially and psychologically rewarding. As second-generation players become more involved in the game, they face the same potential for excessive play and digital game “addiction” as first-generation players. Like the first-generation, some second-generation gamers are more successful at negotiating with the addictive characteristics of online games than others.

Second-generation gamers may not think that “addiction” can happen to them, but they still struggle with managing their desire to play and the other activities in their lives. The players I interviewed talked about their playing habits in a variety of ways, ranging from an “all or nothing” attitude to carefully structuring their play time.

George is in his early thirties, married with a baby on the way, and is struggling to make ends meet. Both he and his wife are trapped in a cycle of temporary jobs that end without turning into a stable career and they are constantly looking for work with inconsistent results. For George, World of Warcraft is a cheap escape from his everyday concerns. George is an avid gamer and could possibly be considered first-generation, except that George, like many second-generation gamers, struggles with the time demands required to be a hardcore gamer. He and his wife, who does not play digital games, fight about joblessness, money and time spent in entertainment rather than more serious pursuits. As a result, George tries to keep the peace by not logging in during evening hours, which is when most first-generation gamers are playing end-game

content. Instead, he spends the evening with his wife and does not begin playing until after she has gone to sleep, so his playing schedule is irregular. He often does not start playing until midnight or later and will play until he falls asleep at the computer or until just before his wife wakes up, in which case he pretends that he was sleeping on the couch. This nocturnal playing schedule makes it difficult for him to function during the day and he cannot successfully maintain it for long periods of time. As a result, George often indulges in “binge” playing where he plays nightly for weeks at a time and then abruptly cuts off his playing for a week or two or more. He expressed how guilty he felt for playing when he knew he should be sleeping or researching jobs, and that secretly playing only added stress to his relationship with his wife.

This cycle of heavy playing followed by abstinence is a pattern that many second-generation gamers fall into as they try to fit game playing into their lives. With few exceptions, players who quit or take a break from the game eventually start playing again. Gaming is their hobby and they crave the game play of World of Warcraft, but even more, it is the social interaction of World of Warcraft that pulls them back. First, World of Warcraft offers gameplay and online socializing at the same time, whereas, during the early years of World of Warcraft, console games had limited online playing capabilities and were more associated with multiplayer in-person play, than with networked playing. Second, and most important, at the time when they decide to take a break, all of their friends are still playing World of Warcraft. Not only are they still bombarded with conversations about World of Warcraft, but if they want to interact with their friends, it is easier to find them in the game than to try to pull their friends out of it.

Second-generation players who imposed bouts of abstinence on themselves occasionally fell into another category—the “born again” anti-World of Warcraft player. Similar to the idea of a “born again” Christian, these players pushed back against the social pressure to rejoin World of Warcraft by vigorously and loudly proclaiming to any current players (1) how much better their life is without World of Warcraft, (2) how much happier they are now that they stopped playing, and (3) how stupid everyone else is for still playing. Occasionally, players attempt to make a big splash with their exit. Within the game, they give away the rare items or in-game money they have collected. They write letters or post messages on forums telling guildmates exactly what they find offensive about the other players. If they are in a position of leadership over a guild or over scheduling or running raids, an ex-player’s abdication from the game may cause others to also quit, a restructuring of the guild, or the transfer of players to other guilds.

Some of these “born again” ex-players quit World of Warcraft and find other sources of entertainment – many move to other digital games. One extremely vocal ex-player swore off digital games and started taking business classes. However, the majority eventually come back to playing digital games in one form or another. For example, several avid “born again” ex-players became militant players of games on Facebook such as Farmville (Zynga, 2009), getting up in the middle of the night to harvest crops on time and requesting help from fellow players daily. These Facebook gamers also re-enabled their World of Warcraft accounts<sup>134</sup> when a new expansion was released.

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<sup>134</sup> Since World of Warcraft is a subscription-based game, players who “quit” the game generally only let the subscription run out. This freezes the account but keeps the characters and items on the account intact. Reactivating the subscription lets players start where they left off rather than forcing them to create new characters.

The “all or nothing” approaches are not very sustainable, so some second-generation gamers set criteria to manage their game time that they can articulate to other people. For example, they play only after their children have gone to bed, or only after work until they go to bed. Each player negotiates how playing digital games fits into his or her life, but a good way of visualizing them on a continuum is to look at how they incorporate social connections into their criteria.

On one end of the continuum, players are responsible only to themselves. These players describe their play time as “until I need to go to sleep” or “while I’m eating dinner” or “just for a little while.” The endpoint is nebulous and easily adjustable. Players with these kinds of criteria for playing tended to express dissatisfaction with the amount of time they spent playing and this sometimes led to “binge” gaming.

Further along the continuum are players who include an aspect outside of themselves. These players say things like “only until this quest chain<sup>135</sup> is completed” or “only Tuesdays and Thursdays” or “only on the weekends” or “before/after school/work.” Although more specific, these criteria are still fairly flexible and players would often break the criteria when an interesting opportunity presented itself, such as friends requesting help or other players offering access to a new challenge.

At the other end of the continuum are players that incorporate not only an aspect outside of themselves, but an aspect that involves other people<sup>136</sup>. These players say

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<sup>135</sup> Many quests in World of Warcraft are arranged in a chain, meaning that you must complete a series of quests in a particular order. You cannot access the later quests until you have completed all of the previous quests to get to the next step.

<sup>136</sup> This end of the continuum also includes players whose gameplay habits are controlled by other people, such as parents imposing play limits on their children, or partners who resent time allocated to the game

things like, “only after my kids are asleep” or “when my wife/husband is at work” or “only when my friends are also available” or “only on raid nights.” Involving other people in their game play choices helps them stick to the criteria they have set. These players sometimes wish to play more often than they do, but they also express more overall satisfaction with their game playing and play more consistently.

Second-generation gamers are interested in learning how to incorporate games into their lives for entertainment. When the game ceases to be fun or the cost of playing becomes too steep, they look for ways of managing their playing habits. The disassociation that second-generation gamers feel toward the gamer stereotype also applies to digital game “addiction.”

### **The Hidden Cost of “Addiction” as a Framework**

The concept of “addiction” and other negative effects have a history of being applied to new media technologies (Marvin, 1988; Sturken, Thomas & Ball-Rokeach, 2004). Comic books prevented the youth from reading literary works. Television was making couch potatoes of us all. Arcade and digital games have been viewed with suspicion almost from their inception. Even the term “Digital games” has a negative connotation, both because they are games—meaning they’re on the non-serious side of the work/play divide—and because they are digital, meaning that they are not real, and therefore, not to be taken seriously. Thus, it seems easy to apply the label “addict” to people playing digital games. Liz Woolley, who founded On-line Gamers Anonymous

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instead of them. However, players whose gameplay choices are entirely controlled by other people are generally dissatisfied with their access to the game.

(OLGA/OLG-Anon) after the suicide of her son while playing Everquest (Spain & Vega, 2005), used the structure and wording from the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program and simply replaced “alcohol” with “gaming” (OLGA, 2009; Liberation Entertainment & Pineiro Escoriaza, 2009). However, thinking about playing digital games in terms of “addiction” is not a productive way to conceptualize how people interact through online communication.

First, labeling “gaming” as addictive denies the diversity of games. Games can be played through many devices – computers, consoles, portable game devices, digital tablets, or even on a mobile phone. Just within the category of online games played on a computer, there are MMOs, Facebook games, free online games, etc. Different kinds of games require different skills – puzzle games, arcade games, role-playing games or first-person-shooter games to name a few – and have different requirements for social interaction and the amount and length of time to play the game. Alcohol, on the other hand, may come in different forms, but it has a consistent physiological effect on an individual. Drinks vary mostly in terms of the severity of the effects, so, while it is possible to make claims about the effects of alcohol as a whole, it is unreasonable to categorize all games as having the same effect on individuals.

Second, addiction assumes that all games have a gradation of “bad” – for example, educational games are “better” and entertainment games are “worse.” This ties in strongly with the technological determinism view of technology which suggests that once a player begins playing a game, he/she becomes shaped by that game, that the game itself imposes the same effect on each individual (Sturken & Thomas, 2004). Seen from

this dystopic perspective, games are inherently addicting and individuals are given little agency in their interactions with games. Technological determinism does not leave room for social constructionism, which gives individuals agency in their interactions with technology. The range of second-generation gamers' decisions about managing their play time shows that players can make very different choices about the same game.

Third, addiction conflates game content and game structure. It is not enough to ask, "Is this a violent game?" Instead, what is the role that violence plays in this game? For example, compared to the modern game, *Sniper Elite* (Rebellion Developments, 2005), the old arcade game *Space Invaders* (Taito Corporation, 1978) has a much higher kill count. However, how should we compare the psychological impact of cute, bloodless graphics of the alien ships being attacked in the arcade game with the close-up videos of heads exploding and blood spraying in *Snipe Elite*? Unlike the movie rating system which codifies movie scenes that show sex, violence, profanity, etc., the digital game rating system does not account for digital games being interactive. Digital games put the player within the action, asking players to engage in specific behaviors in order to advance the storyline or gain rewards. It is more helpful to think about content and structure in relationship with each other: How does the player observe or instigate or perpetuate the violence and how does that relate to the game's structure? For example, Gee (2003) discusses how the beginning tutorial of *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* (Core Design, 1999) has an instructor who tells both the character and the player how to get through the level. Players who follow all of the instructions exactly will pass the level, but will miss hidden treasures and items useful later in the game. Gee brings this up

as an example of immersive learning, but it also provides an excellent example of how the structure of the game has a greater impact on player behavior than just the content.

Finally, labeling digital games as addictive creates a demand for oversight and regulation.

Addiction has become a familiar meme—the sad, weak-willed and non-productive members of society become alcoholics, drug addicts, or neurotics with weekly therapy appointments. We are comfortable with these labels. We have government and social agencies designed to regulate addicted individuals and control companies making harmful products. When the media contacted Sony Online Entertainment for comment about Elizabeth Woolley blaming her son's suicide on an addiction to EverQuest, Scott McDaniel, then VP of Marketing, said, "There's a duty on the consumer to use it responsibly" (quoted in Spain & Vega, 2005). This image of a grieving mother and her dead son being taken advantage of by an evil corporation begs us to demand justice without looking deeper to find out that the son had a history of mental and emotional problems and suffered seizures. Using the label addiction glosses over potentially important connections between the combination of particular warning signs, such as depression, joblessness and chemical imbalances, which may lead to attempted suicides. It does not take into account the links between managing depression and the social benefits of online gaming communities (as described in Chapter 4), or personality traits and online games (Mehroof & Griffiths, 2010). Oversight and regulation for an addictive activity provide a limited framework for addressing the issue of some players choosing to spend large amounts of time playing an online game.

## **Conclusion**

Digital game “addiction” is a pervasive representation of digital games and their players. “Addiction” is discussed by television pundits, congressional hearings, researchers and news media, and caricatures of game-obsessed players show up in comedic and dramatic television shows. Despite the hype, the number of second-generation gamers continues to grow larger as changes in technology, the economy, and access make games more available and less of a specialized hobby. Most second-generation gamers think that “addiction” would not happen to them, but at the same time, most develop strategies for managing their play time. The experience of second-generation gamers suggests that there are hidden costs to applying the framework of addiction to digital game playing. The “addiction” framework denies the diversity of games, assumes a negative gradation to all games, conflates game content with game structure rather than considering the role of each, and creates a demand for oversight and regulation without considering the broader context within which an individual chooses to play games.

## **Chapter 6: Significance and directions for future research**

This final chapter examines the contributions of this dissertation to the discipline of Communication and related interdisciplinary fields. The research documented herein explores four key discourses on the playing of digital games: dispositions, performed individual and social identities, and digital game “addiction.” Through the lens of Communication, this dissertation research crosses disciplinary boundaries with the fields of Game Studies, Performance Studies, online communities research, and Media Studies. The key contributions of this research are:

- Differentiation between first- and second-generation gamers
- A longitudinal examination of identity performance in an MMO
- Hidden costs of the “addiction” framework

This chapter discusses the implications of these three contributions in relation to existing bodies of research and suggests future studies to enhance our understanding of the role Communication plays in the increasingly social and complex world of Internet technologies.

### **Differentiation Between First- and Second-Generation Gamers**

The study of communication and culture within the technology of digital games connects the fields of Communication and Game Studies. Game Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that engages both the psychological and social impacts of play and games (cf. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008; Goldstein & Raessens, 2005; Mäyrä, 2008). Game Studies has attracted researchers from a variety of fields encompassing a wide range of methodological approaches, areas of interest and avenues

of entry into games and the people that play them. This dissertation seeks both to add knowledge about and disambiguate key areas of research that connect Communication and Game Studies. The differentiation between first- and second-generation gamers is a significant contribution to research on digital games.

From the ethnographic perspective, the online communities that develop around MMOs like World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), offer a microcosm culture with fascinating conventions of behavior developed in synergy with the coded rules of the virtual space through which people interact. Currently, there is a narrow understanding of what it means to be a gamer. Games (and their players) are often described by genre, e.g., first-person shooter (fps) players or puzzle game players, but this categorization overly simplifies players' behaviors. Bartle (1996) and Yee (2006) organize players in terms of what motivates them to play a particular type of game; however, games like World of Warcraft offer complex gameplay options that can appeal to all the different types of player motivation. Juul (2010) focuses on innovations in console gaming like the Nintendo Wii and X-Box RockBand-style games and discusses *hardcore gamers* versus *casual gamers* in terms of the types of games they play—hardcore gamers play intensive, time-consuming games while casual gamers play easily learned games with intuitive controllers. Juul found that many casual gamers are actually people who had previously played video games and were returning to gaming:

“Hence the bigger picture was not just that video games were finding a new audience, but also that video games were reconnecting with an audience that had been lost. Why? The answer: the first video games had

been made for a general audience because there was no separate audience of game experts at the time. Between the arcade games of the early 1980s and today, video games have matured as a medium, developed a large set of conventions, grown a specialized audience of fans” (p. 2, Juul, 2010).

Juul observed an important distinction between gamers, but his use of the term “casual” is confusing because (1) if “casual gamer” is defined by the *type of games played* this definition gets blurry because many hardcore gamers also play console games, including Rockband, or mobile games, including Angry Birds (Rovio Mobile, 2009), and casual players explore game titles designed for hardcore gamers; (2) if “casual gamer” describes the amount of *time spent playing*, some casual gamers play video games in the morning before going to work, during work, and after work in the evening, sometimes for hours at a time, making it clear that this is not a “casual” hobby for them; and lastly, (3) if “casual gamer” is defined by the *skill level of the player*, her skill changes based on the experience of the player with other games, time spent playing this game, and the particular skills required by the type of game. Rather than using casual or hardcore labels for players, I unpacked the concept of “casual gamer” by looking at how players enact different dispositions in their engagements with the game and other players and placing gamers on a continuum.

First- and second-generation gamers are differentiated based on their gaming disposition and their interest in and ability to immerse themselves in the dominant culture of the hardcore gamers. Compared to Brown and Thomas’ (2008) attributes of the [first-

generation] gamer disposition, second-generation gamers' dispositions are more focused on quick gratification with the least mental effort.

- Second-generation gamers have an *ease-of-use orientation*. They talk about World of Warcraft as cost-effective entertainment, as accessible, and as a fun social environment.
- Second-generation gamers *embody diversity* in two ways: They dabble in multiple characters and aspects of the game and they also believe that they are diversified from the “gamer” stereotype.
- Second-generation gamers *thrive on consistency* by appreciating entertainment that does not require a high investment of mental energy. They have limited time to play and want to enjoy the experience, rather than be overly challenged.
- Second-generation gamers *learn only what is necessary*. They are busy people with full lives and, unless something catches their fancy, they would rather passively consume entertainment than actively engage in entertainment.
- Second-generation gamers *rely on proven solutions*. Faced with a challenge, second-generation gamers ask for advice from other players or, as a last resort, look up the answer on an online knowledge database. They are rarely caught up in the excitement of the exploration and problem solving that are key motivators for first-generation gamers.

Viewing the game play disposition of second-generation gamers as distinct from first-generation gamers can help researchers understand what players learn from digital games. In addition, numerical order of the generations is meant to describe a player's

investment into the digital-game playing culture, not how long she has been playing digital games. For the moment, the second-generation gamer disposition suggests a way of understanding why different players approach the same game in different ways. At the same time, the generational framework is also open for future changes to the game culture, game structure and gaming technology.

Some second-generation players morph into first-generation players as their investment into and understanding of video games increases; however, the “gamer culture” discussed by the media and studied by games researchers also continues to change and develop. As “gaming” increases in popularity, a third-generation wave of players who have a different set of conceptions about what it means to be a gamer, may approach a game like World of Warcraft from a different perspective leading to a third flavor of “gamer disposition.”

In addition, the structure of how games are designed is also changing. The vanilla release of World of Warcraft in 2004 offered players a different playing experience than the expansions released in 2007, 2008, and 2010. The patches and expansions not only fixed errors in the game, but made fundamental changes to the UI and to the amount and types of mini-games available to players. The nature of the game changed and made itself more accessible to second-generation players. At the same time, new technology continues to be developed that shapes the gamer experience. Motion-controlled interfaces, better graphics and processors, and mobile technologies and apps encourage new ways of thinking about gaming. As gaming and gaming technologies continue to

change in response to the players' needs and expectations, the expectations of players will also change, creating a space for third-generation players.

These observations open new directions for future research. More longitudinal studies could trace the process by which second-generation gamers learn social norms and game-specific skills. Some research has been done in this regard (e.g. Pearce, 2009), but it needs to situate second-generation gamers as a distinct group of players with a different disposition of play. Subsequently, another area of further research is the examination of if and how second-generation gamers modify their media consumption after exposure to the "gamer culture." Williams, Yee, and Caplan (2008) have survey data suggesting that gamers spend less time watching television, but this does not reveal the dispositional elements of if and how players might think differently about interactions with technology after playing games.

Lastly, many researchers have explored the psychological motivations for playing and enjoying digital games and found a wide variety of answers for the appeal of games. Utilizing the range between first- and second-generation gamer dispositions would allow a new entry point for exploring player motivation. For example, it would shift the research question from one of motivation/reward-seeking to one of "ways of thinking."

### **A Longitudinal Examination of Identity Performance in an MMO**

This dissertation uses Communication theoretical frameworks that are connected to both Performance Studies and research on online communities to explore the social interactions that happen through online communication. The research sought to both add knowledge about and tease out unique examples of identity performance in online

communities. A longitudinal examination of identity performance in an MMO is a significant contribution to research on online communities and identity performance.

One important aspect of communication technologies is the capacity to connect like-minded people over vast distances. Writing about one of the earliest text-based online spaces, Rheingold (1993/2000) described the powerful social connections formed through the Internet as a *virtual community*. “Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. xx). Of his personal experience with the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL), Rheingold said:

“Finding the WELL was like discovering a cozy little world that had been flourishing without me, hidden within the walls of my house; an entire cast of characters welcomed me to the troupe with great merriment as soon as I found the secret door. Like others who fell into the WELL, I soon discovered that I was audience, performer, and scriptwriter, along with my companions, in an ongoing improvisation. A full-scale subculture was growing on the other side of my telephone jack, and they invited me to help create something new.” (p. xv)

Since Rheingold’s initial research, the communication technologies that can create a virtual community have expanded to include a variety of text-based and graphical interfaces, everything from blogs to forums to online games to virtual worlds. Following in Rheingold’s footsteps, data for this dissertation was collected utilizing

online ethnographic methods. Ethnography is a traditional anthropological method which requires the researcher to immerse herself in the culture she is examining, and it has been successfully used to explore the culture of online communities (e.g., Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006b). Traditional ethnography relies heavily on observation – unobtrusively watching patterns of behavior emerge as you sit in a corner (sometimes literally) while people go about their daily lives – which is difficult to do in a virtual setting. Boellstorff (2008) conducted his research inside the digitally created ‘virtual world’ of Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003), a computer program that lets you create an avatar (a virtual body) and move the avatar around a three-dimensional space with objects and the avatars of other people. Boellstorff used participant observation to gather ideas for later discussion in small groups that met in the virtual world. Once he identified a behavior pattern, he and his discussants would talk about how that behavior reflected the sociality of their group within Second Life.

Nardi (2010) set her ethnographic research in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), a digital game with much more structured interaction than a virtual world and also the main site for research for this dissertation. While Boellstorff (2008) interacted with people “hanging out,” Nardi’s subjects were more likely to be working on a checklist of tasks (“quests”) provided by the game, so interactions with the researcher were frequently goal-based. She also centered her research on two in-game guilds—groups of players who played and socialized together online. Guilds are a foundational social structure built into the game structure of many online games and guilds offer an opportunity for an ethnographer to interact with a cohesive group of people.

In the traditional model of ethnography, the researcher observes inhabitants of a community during their daily activities. In addressing her experience in her ethnography of Everquest (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999), another massively multiplayer online (MMO) game like World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), Taylor (2006b), quotes Christine Hine saying, "...The ethnographer inhabits a kind of in-between world, simultaneously native and stranger" (Taylor, 2006b, p. 17). The ethnographic focus of this dissertation studies the entry of other "strangers" into the "native" environment. Although they play games, these "strangers" fall outside of the stereotype of the digital game player community, both in their demographics and in their approach to playing. Expanding on a traditional ethnography, this dissertation examined the entry of these "newbie" players into a vibrant gamer culture, treating them as a new generation of digital game players who brought with them assumptions about what it means to play digital games. Thus, the second-generation subjects of this dissertation are, like Hine's ethnographer, "simultaneously native and stranger."

The dissertation followed the entry of second-generation players into World of Warcraft and examined their development of both their individual and social gamer identities. In creating a gamer identity, most second-generation players sought ways to make their social interactions easier by choosing to pass as the stereotypical player or by creating small enclaves where their differences from first-generation players were less remarkable. Physical characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or age were something they could hide from random players, but could choose to divulge to guildmembers or players with whom they wished to develop a deeper connection. For some second-generation

players, their gamer identity was a carefully crafted performance designed to meet the expectations of first-generation players. For others, their gamer identity is a painstakingly authentic portrait of their physical-world identity.

Kaye is an example of a second-generation player who struggled with creating an online identity, in part because she struggled with her physical identity. Kaye was female, not married, not working, and she lacked a sense of connection to family or community. She saw a boyfriend on weekends, but spent the majority of every week isolated in her apartment. She was diagnosed as bipolar and her mood swings made it difficult for her to interact socially. Her therapist had assigned another patient to be her mentor and to check up on her and, despite the fact that she was barely computer literate, her mentor had convinced her to try World of Warcraft. Kaye started a character and wandered around, occasionally completing quests, leveling and upgrading her gear, but, while she had plenty of free time to spend in the game she certainly did not devote much thought to it and did not progress quickly. At first, she only interacted with her therapist-assigned mentor in the game. He quickly had her join his guild, which consisted only of close friends he had met in person. She made loose acquaintance with them, but rarely grouped, preferring to explore on her own.

The guild, becoming ambitious, began running quests together and invited Kaye to join. Once in the group, her behaviors were erratic—sometimes she would be responsive to typed communication and other times she simply ignored them. She did not join the guild VoIP server. One night she began typing random comments in guild chat. Words were misspelled, one letter was held down for several lines of text, and whole

sentences were typed in all capital letters. Textually, this was the equivalent of Kaye finding a crowd of people casually talking at a cocktail party, bursting in and jumping up and down while waving her arms and yelling random words and nonsense sounds. Kaye did not respond to queries about her odd behavior and eventually logged off. This happened several times, with no clarity offered by Kaye at the time. After several weeks of constant play and slowly getting to know the guildmembers Kaye again had a “bad” night, only this time she removed herself from the guild before engaging in erratic behavior. The next evening, she claimed it had been a mistake and asked to be re-invited to the guild. A couple of nights later, she again removed herself from the guild. After a few weeks, she abruptly quit playing World of Warcraft.

Several interviews with Kaye revealed an explanation for her behavior. Kaye was an alcoholic, although she was careful to hide this fact from the few people in her life. Neither her family, her boyfriend, nor her therapist knew how much alcohol she regularly consumed. When Kaye began playing World of Warcraft, it was just another distraction from her everyday life and something to keep her occupied while she was drinking. At first, she felt no connection with the other players in the game, despite knowing her mentor personally, and felt no qualms about behaving rudely or doing something strange while drunk. All of the characters in World of Warcraft were merely bits on the screen and did not need to be treated like real people. However, after Kaye began building a connection with the other members of the guild, her perception of the other players had shifted and she no longer felt comfortable being drunk in front of them. For Kaye, when the graphics on the screen became associated with personalities, the social connections

became too much for her. She attempted to withdraw from the guild, but then found herself speaking to other players with other guilds. Ultimately, she decided that the social connections within World of Warcraft made her as uncomfortable as the social connections offline.

For Kaye and many other second-generation players, entry into World of Warcraft becomes an unexpected performance of identity. It forces players to confront their personal sense of identity in choosing which aspects to highlight and which to hide in their interactions with other players. In addition, while first-generation players are familiar with the deeply personal social connections that can develop during gameplay, second-generation players are often surprised by the strength of connection they feel with an MMO and how their identity performance changes when they become members of a community.

MMOs offer a rich site for future studies in identity performance and online communities research. Although I located pockets of second-generation gamers, by their very nature they do not congregate in large groups, unlike the raiding guilds of first-generation gamers. Further studies of second-generation players should build on the methods developed in this dissertation and include further documentation of players' entry and assimilation into gamer culture and their development of a gamer identity.

### **The Hidden Costs of the “Addiction” Framework**

Media Studies is a broad area of research within Communication which, among other things, is concerned with the social impact of online communication. This dissertation sought to push the boundaries of knowledge in Communication from the

perspective of media consumption and fan culture. Uncovering the hidden costs of using an “addiction” framework to describe player behaviors is a significant contribution to research on media consumption.

“We are not the first generation to wonder at the rapid and extraordinary shifts in the dimension of the world and the human relationships it contains as a result of new forms of communication, or to be surprised by the changes those shifts occasion in the regular pattern of our lives” (Marvin, 1988, p. 3). The introduction of new technology makes possible the rearrangement of social norms and power structures. The rapid growth of computers, the Internet, and mobile devices over the past thirty years has emphasized the ability of technologies to augment rapid social change. Public discussions abound about the potential benefits and problems from these technologies<sup>137</sup>. These public discussions foster a sense of urgency in understanding the role technology takes in our lives; however, academic research into media effects and critical/cultural studies of technology has had difficulty keeping pace with rapid change. Public opinion, therefore, is riddled with misconceptions and misunderstandings about media consumption. Castells (2001) describes how rapid technological change led to negative perceptions of the Internet:

“The speed of transformation has made it difficult for scholarly research to follow the pace of change with an adequate supply of empirical studies on the whys and wherefores of the Internet-based economy and society.

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<sup>137</sup> For example, social networking sites such as twitter and facebook were used to rally, organize and keep media attention on popular revolts in Egypt in 2010.

Taking advantage of this relative void of reliable investigation, ideology and gossip have permeated the understanding of this fundamental dimension of our lives, as is often the case in periods of rapid social change. Sometimes this had been in the form of futurological prophecies based on the simplistic extrapolation of social consequences from the technological wonders emerging from science and engineering; at other times, it appears as critical dystopias, denouncing the supposedly alienating effects of the Internet before even practicing it. The media, keen to inform an anxious public, but lacking the autonomous capacity to assess social trends with rigor, oscillate between reporting the amazing future on offer and following the basic principle of journalism: only bad news is worthy news” (p. 3).

Fear that technologies will encourage isolation, deception, addiction, and loss of community is not unique to the Internet. It is a socially driven fear of uncontrolled change that has appeared with each introduction of new communication technologies. Standage (1998/2007) argued that concerns originally raised about the telegraph are similar to concerns now being raised about the impact of the Internet. “Public reaction to the new technologies was, in both cases, a confused mixture of hype and skepticism” (p. 207).

Following a tradition of exploring social norms by examining the everyday practices of popular culture, this dissertation focused on how individuals wrestle with public concerns about video games by examining gameplay practices of second-generation players. Miller (1998) emphasized the importance of applying social theory to

mundane activities in order to expose hidden assumptions. Radway (1984) questioned general assumptions about why women consumed romance novels, finding that this form of entertainment filled a complicated social need for women readers. In a similar effort to look below surface-level assumptions, Kutner and Olsen (2008) questioned stereotypes about children and video game play. They collected data on how children actually play video games and asked the children what they thought about their own game use. Their subjects provided surprisingly thoughtful answers indicating that even young “gamers” are aware of concerns about the social impact of technology and reject many of the behaviors that concern parents and politicians. Like Kutner and Olsen, this dissertation combined observation and interviews in order to explore the motivations behind video-game-consumption choices, and used this data to critically examine popular perceptions about video game “addiction.”

Second-generation players are aware of the threat of video game “addiction” and work to find a successful juggling of their game playing with the rest of the demands on their time. Looking across their stories, the players who included a social component in determining the limits of their gameplay were able to sustain their playing and expressed that they were not playing World of Warcraft “too much.” This suggests that perhaps “addiction,” which is a physiological state of dependency, is not a useful framework for describing how players interact with an MMO.

Labeling gaming as “addictive” situates it within a larger discourse of addiction. It denies the diversity of games, assumes that all games are a gradation of “bad,” conflates game content and game structure and creates a demand for oversight and

regulation. Labeling games “addictive” does not encourage a deeper exploration of the role that digital games play in players’ lives. It does not take into account the context within which digital gamers choose to play video games over the many other forms of entertainment available in the modern era. For example, Michael’s story offers an alternative representation of the video game “addict.”

Michael was a twenty-five-year-old former Army serviceman who had spent most of his civilian life living in Georgia near where he had been born. He had joined the Army out of high school and completed one tour of duty in Iraq before returning home. During the time this research was completed, the “War on Terror” had become a drawn-out battle on multiple fronts. Servicemen and women were joining the military branches, completing training and tours of duty and returning home, and some were playing video games throughout the process. Both first- and second-generation players included active and former military personnel. Of the second-generation gamers that I interviewed five discussed suffering from PTSD, including Michael.

Michael was an avid World of Warcraft player and I found him online practically any hour that I logged in. He was very social in the game and preferred group activities over soloing. He had a vast network of other players whom he happily pulled together to tackle large and small challenges. For Michael, PTSD was a quiet but constant force in his life. Although he usually put on a happy face, he was often moody and temperamental. One night he would be laughing and joking and the life of the party, the next he would be silent, refusing to login to his VoIP server and ignoring whispers in the game. On good nights, he ran raids and engaged in silly activities like running low-level

instances with upper-level characters for fun or nostalgia. On bad nights, he focused exclusively on PvP (Player versus Player) activities, a group of mini-games within World of Warcraft similar to Capture-the-Flag or deathmatch-style team competitions. Michael would spend hour after hour playing PvP, not working with his social network to form competitive groups that would excel at PvP, but playing with random groups resulting in some victory but many defeats. These PvP activities gained him honor points, but not efficiently, which suggests that his PvPing focused more on mental escape than active participation in the game.

In his personal life, Michael struggled to hold down jobs which were mostly arranged by friends or family—working with his father in construction or with a friend in a yard-maintenance company. Most of his jobs ended for unclear reasons summed up by “because my boss was a douche.” On good days, Michael’s social nature extended beyond the game: he loved to host parties at his house to play console games like Smash Bros or American Idol, and board games like Cranium. He arranged movie nights and invited people to play World of Warcraft in LAN-style (local-area network), with everyone bringing a laptop to his house and playing together in his living room. Often when people were over he would move restlessly around the room regaling the party with funny and self-deprecating stories from his time in the Army. When the party wound down and the people left, he would pick up his aging laptop and go back to playing World of Warcraft. As his job opportunities grew farther apart, so did his ability to host parties.

His sleep was restless and he preferred to fall asleep on the couch playing World of Warcraft than to sleep next to his girlfriend in their bed. Coffee, soda and chain-smoking several packs a day helped him put off sleeping until exhaustion took over. Bills often went unpaid, the rent was consistently late, his electricity and phone accounts were shut off several times, and his car was repossessed. He attempted to re-enlist, but the Army would not accept him until he reduced his debt. Eventually, his girlfriend kicked him out and he moved back in with his parents.

Unlike many other players, Michael never expressed concern or regret about the amount of time he spent playing World of Warcraft. He described it as “cheap entertainment” and a “way to see all my friends” when he had no money for gas or to go out with friends. When he held jobs, he did not use World of Warcraft as an excuse to be late to work although he was sometimes tired from lack of sleep. He seemed to relish physical work when it was available, but even manual labor did not help him sleep any better.

On the surface, Michael’s story looks like another instance of digital game “addiction;” however, calling Michael an addict denies the diversity of games. Michael was not playing any game. He was not playing puzzle games or combat simulations; although he liked those kinds of games. He was drawn to World of Warcraft because the structure of the game offered him a particular social experience. Michael had a high-school diploma, little work experience, and had retired from the Army with a set of skills that he was unable to apply to another career. The economic downturn had added Michael to a long list of the perpetually unemployed. At the same time, he had a strong

need for social interaction that he no longer had the money to fill by arranging parties and group outings. The constant World of Warcraft playing seemed to be more of a symptom of his depression, his PTSD, and his inability to re-assimilate with the civilian life than with an addiction to play a particular game.

Describing Michael as an addict also implies that playing the game has only a negative impact. For Michael, World of Warcraft offered social opportunities that were unavailable to him in the physical world. Michael's sense of identity was closely connected to his ability to protect and provide for people. In World of Warcraft, he could be magnanimous with his time and with the virtual gold and gear he collected. He had multiple characters and could play whichever role (Tank/Healer/DPS) was needed within a group to defeat a particular challenge. He readily offered rare items to people who were having trouble attaining them. His persona in World of Warcraft fits more closely with his image of himself than his reality. Michael also felt a need to spend time with people and World of Warcraft offered him that option any time of the day or night.

The "addiction" framework also conflates game content and game structure. To the uninformed observer, Michael spent hours clicking on his mouse buttons, violently attacking fantasy creatures and other players. In contrast, an understanding of the structure of World of Warcraft helps an observer recognize that what Michael craved was the structure and goals of the game world. World of Warcraft was full of checklists and tiered challenges. The requirements for making progress in the game were clearly stated. The experience he needed for leveling was quantifiable. Achievements were unlocked when he met certain criteria. Recipes listed the specific items he needed to combine in

order to form crafted items. The UI even showed him when he was making progress on quests. For example, if he needed to collect 7 “[Mana Wraith Essence]” the UI showed him how many he had collected as well as when he had completed the quest and needed to turn the quest items into the quest giver. More importantly, vendors had a fixed sales price for items and a fixed purchase price for items that he collected during gameplay. As a player, Michael was never really broke because he always knew the vendor value of items and had the option of grinding random monsters for money and items to sell.

The structure of World of Warcraft also offered Michael a series of victories. He had the opportunity to constantly reward himself by collecting experience, gear, in-game gold, “rep” with different factions, PvP honor points, Achievement points, Arena rankings, badges, etc. The majority of the activities built into the game structure had clear and quantifiable rewards, and many of these rewards were accessible through diligence rather than skill<sup>138</sup>. Not only was Michael rewarded through the structure of the game, but World of Warcraft also made it easy to accrue social rewards because many elements of the game required multiple players to complete.

The addiction framework also creates a demand for oversight and regulation. The amount of time Michael spent playing World of Warcraft seemed excessive. His personal relationships and his career options suffered. “Addiction” implies that these negative impacts should have been mitigated by imposing a time limit on his playing. However, it does not take into account the positive impacts of playing games. World of Warcraft offered Michael a sense of structure, purpose and community, and helped him combat his

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<sup>138</sup> See, for example, the discussion on “welfare epics” in Chapter 1.

frustrations and his feelings of inadequacy. Rizzo et al. (2011) found that combat veterans with PTSD frequently played commercial first-person-shooter digital games, pondered if that might be a form of self-treatment and created a successful combat-simulation for PTSD treatment. Seen from this perspective, Michael's excessive playing of World of Warcraft is not about addiction, but is instead a form of self-medication for other events going on in his life. "Self-medication" is only one possible framework that may be more useful for Media Studies scholars than "addiction," but understanding the limitations of the "addiction" framework opens opportunities for a more useful framework to be developed.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation explored the social impacts of online communication by examining the interactions between gamers and the complex social world supported by World of Warcraft. Only through immersing oneself in the details of this digital space can a researcher develop an understanding of the roles that Internet technologies and the underlying philosophy of the game have in shaping the gaming and social experience of the gamer. By examining dispositions, identity performances and responses to the discourse of addiction, I differentiated between first- and second-generation gamers, recorded the development of individual and social identities, and identified the hidden cost of the "addiction" framework, as well as other insights observed in the everyday interactions between first- and second-generation gamers and the continuing evolution of the digital space in which they interact.

### **Gameography**

Angry Birds (Rovio Mobile, 2009)

Breakout (Atari, Inc., 1976)

Everquest (Sony Entertainment, 1999)

Farmville (Zynga, 2009)

Lord of the Rings Online (Turbine, Inc., 2007)

Rockband (Electronic Arts, 2007)

Second Life (Linden Lab, 2004)

Sniper Elite (Rebellion Developments, 2005)

Space Invaders (Taito Corporation, 1978)

Star Wars Galaxies (Sony Online Entertainment, 2003)

Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation (Core Design, 1999)

World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment/Activision Blizzard, 2004)

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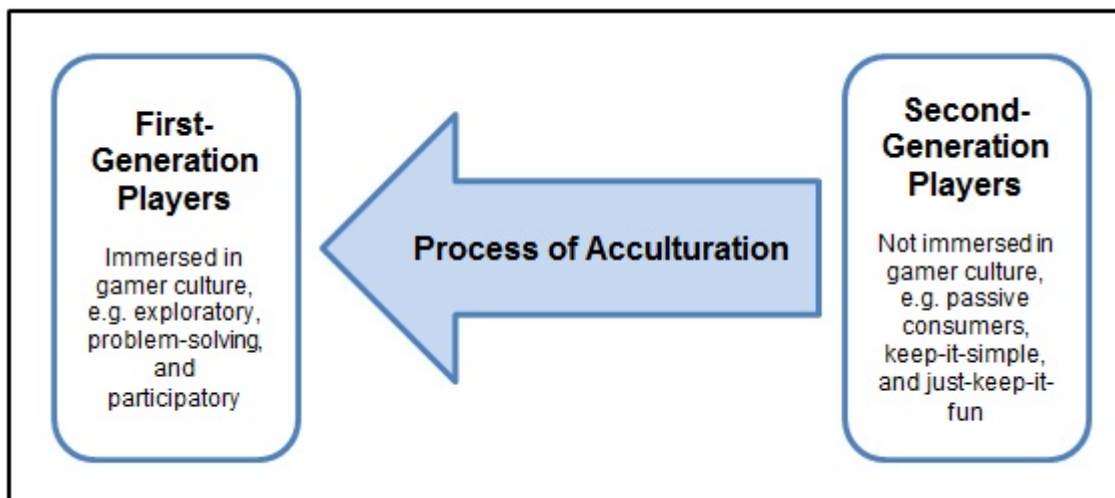
**Appendix: Figures****Figure 1**

Figure 1. Second-generation players can learn a first-generation gaming disposition.

**Figure 2**



Figure 2. A caricature of the older male gamer who is “addicted” to digital games.

Figure 3



Figure 3. The cast of South Park after their characters have morphed into “gamers.”