# INDIVIDUAL COPYCATS: MEMETICS, IDENTITY AND COLLABORATION IN THE *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation uses the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) *World of Warcraft* as a location for inquiry into how players learn to collaborate, forge identities, and achieve both personal and group goals. I focus specifically on a memetics based framework, looking at how memes operate within *WoW* while paying careful attention to what gamers do to develop individual and group identities in light of so many things in the game being memetic. The study focuses around two guiding principles: there's a lot of modeling and copying/replicating happening in *WoW*, but gamers still work to build individual and group identities that represent something unique.

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## Introduction: Do Goblins Dream of Electric Loot?

*Hey there! Well met! My name is Phill, and I kill dragons.*

Figure 1: Waving Goblin. For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this dissertation.

My name actually IS Phill, but throughout this document when you see the blue italics (for interpretation of the references to color in this and all other portions of this text, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this dissertation), the "speaker" is actually a *World of Warcraft* in-game character, or "toon"—the name given to *Warcraft* game world avatars derived from the word "cartoon" due to early role-playing games resembling comic books. In the case of the beginning of each chapter, it is my toon speaking, though in the body chapters it could be any of my participants (always attributed, of course). For those reading a black and white copy, this text will appear slightly fuzzy and gray scaled. For the purposes of the study, I gave my specific toon the pseudonym "Phill" as it was an elegant way to protect the group's online identity (so that no one can trace my toon back to me and through that find my guild) and because it is practical to use my own name when speaking of myself.

This introduction is meant to serve as a sort of roadmap to game terminology and scenarios. I will, in the body of the text, revisit these terms for clarification, but I did not want to thrust you, my reader, too quickly into Azeroth—the "world" of *Warcraft*—without some basic information. I ask that you soldier on—some pun intended—if these first few pages seem a touch dry. As when we build anything, the foundation can seem a bit boring when compared to the structure itself, but everything stands on a solid base of something, lest it collapse.

*I'm a Death Knight…*

Death Knight is one of the ten *WoW* playable classes. Toons have three major distinguishing factors in the game: gender (which is visually important but has no "game mechanics based" impact on the toon, though it can be of huge social importance and is hence important to the game), race (of which the game offers 12, each with different game mechanics benefits. For example the goblin Death Knight addressing you here has a racial bonus called "pack hobgoblin," which provides him with a little minion that will run to his personal bank and bring back items), and class. The ten class designations have within them a number of "specifications" or specs, based on a set of three trees. The choice of "spec" a toon makes defines his or her role in most encounters.

*…about to engage in a PuG…*

PuG stands for "pick up group," which means that instead of the group being pre-established it was assembled, either partly or entirely, by public solicitation of people who may or may not be strangers. In groups where some but not all of the members are regulars, "PuG" is also used to designate the picked up group members (e.g. "It wasn't my fault! The PuG missed his interrupt!")

*…raid on Blackwing Descent.*

This can be a place where even somewhat seasoned *WoW* players get a bit confused by term usage, so again, bear with please, as I am confident it will make sense once I've finished. Blackwing Descent is a raid instance. "Raid" is a key term that appears throughout this dissertation, as my participants and the major unit I was observing was a "raid" group. Here's where it gets tricky: "raid" is a very elastic word in *WoW*speak.

Starting from the top, a raid is an instance—an instance being a part of the game world that exists only for a set group of people, meaning it is but one "instance" of the events at a location—meant for 10 or 25 (once, but no longer, also 40) players. They are what classic Role-Playing Gamers would refer to as "dungeons," or large game geographic areas, usually enclosed though not always, that contain a large number of "bosses"—major enemies that constitute significant, difficult battle encounters and which drop fabulous loot for the players to obtain—and "trash" mobs (groups of enemies) which are enemies that fill in the space, named "trash" as gamers consider them to be the wasteful extra material between bosses. To successfully complete a raid, in the case of my research a ten person raid, a fairly static set of toon roles is needed. I'll return to that in just a second.

That is the first noun form of "raid"—the instance. But gamers also refer to the group as a "raid" (also as a "raid group," though the word "group" is almost always left off unless the speaker is attempting to specify between). For example, my participant Iceman might say, "*Nice job, asshat. You wiped the raid.*" What he means, in that context, is that the actions of one person have caused the entire group to die or "wipe" (from "wiped out").

Raid is also a verb, however, used by gamers. Phill, speaking to you here, is about to raid. So taken in total, it's time for Phill to raid, because the raid is headed to the raid to send out summons—as there are large stones in front of each raid instance that allow the early arrivers, by clicking, to "summon" or teleport the other members of the raid to the location. "Raid," as a four letter word, gets as much mileage in *WoW* as any other four letter word, and that's really saying something.

*I have as second to talk. They need to find another tank and a healer. As always, "full on DPS."* Earlier I mentioned, briefly, specs. There are numerous specs—too many for me to account for here without this document turning into a sickening stew of video game nerdery—but specs basically break down so that they fit into one of three designations:

1) Tank: tanks are meant to take damage and coordinate action by moving the enemy around the staging area. Their primary concern is something called "aggro"—short for "aggravation"—which is the attention of, and hence the attacks from, any enemy in the game. Later in this document I will offer more fine grain detail on what aggro means to a raid group, but the important thing to know from the start is that the job of the tank is to keep the attention of enemies and be the person who gets hit most often.

2) Healer: healers sort of self-define with their name. Their job is to heal the damage that raid members take. There are generally two types of healing duties in a raid: a tank healer, who is responsible for healing the tank(s), and a "raid" healer who is responsible for healing everyone else. Healers should never have aggro, and healers very rarely do damage.

3) DPS: DPS—Damage Per Second—is the designation given to the bulk of the raid's members, the people who are there to do the actual "damage" to the dragon or whatever vile beast the group is engaging. There is no clear origin point for why they are referred to as DPS and not "damage," but a fair assumption would be because the measuring stick for the worth of a DPS toon is his or her DPS (a measurable—the amount of damage he or she does per second). DPS are classified primarily in two types as well: melee (those who stand close enough to the enemy to hit with hand-to-hand weapons) and ranged (those who can attack from a distance with spells or projectiles).

In most raid instances, the break down for a ten person group is this: one dedicated tank, one tank with a DPS offspec, two dedicated healers, one healer with a DPS offspec, and five DPS of a generally even split (usually three range, two melee, since there is no range based tank/DPS class but there can be both range and melee based DPS/healer combinations).

*It looks like they found their tank and healer while nerd boy here was going on and on about technical stuff. I'd best repair my axe and take this summon. I hope my token drops this time. For blood and honor!*

A few minor points before we begin in earnest: one of the primary motivations for PuGs, and really for all raiders to one degree or another, is the acquisition of gear so that they can take on more challenging content. Here my toon references a "token." Each set of raids—designated as "tiers"—has a specific set of armor that is the best possible gear to that point for a respective spec/class combination. These pieces are purchased using "tokens" dropped by bosses within the raid. The distribution of tokens across the raid group I researched was never a

major issue, but the need to obtain gear to be "geared enough"—meaning "good enough" to raid, essentially, as gear equates to statistics which make the player more viable mechanically within the game—comes up from time-to-time in the following pages. As does the need to prepare before raids, which in Phill here's case simply meant repairing his weapon. Much more goes into preparing a raid when a full guild group runs (gathering supplies, making potions and feasts to increase stats, etc.). This will also be a topic that is revisited in the following pages.

It is my sincere hope that this short introduction offered the information needed to embark on the 200-page-quest of reading this dissertation, but should you, dear reader, find at any point that you have to take the hit, run back to understand a term, and try again, it may not say much for my writing style or content, but it would prove that art can imitate the art that teaches us about life. Blue-speaking Phill has died to date 5961 times. But he's also—thanks to his amazing guild-mates/research participants—done everything one can do in the *World of Warcraft*. Almost 6000 deaths and he's a raging success, flying around on rare-drop dragon mounts and swinging heroic axes with the best possible enchants to insure they cleave with precision. Here's hoping all our careers have so much reward for so much risk, that in our lives and our work we can learn so much from falling down that we stand tall knowing we'll fall down again, and again, and again, and that it's perfectly okay.

## Chapter 1: What Happens in Azeroth Can't Seem to Stay in Azeroth

*There's this guy I know.*

*Okay, he's not a guy. He's an Artificial Intelligence. An AI. He's a non-player character. An NPC. His name is Garrosh Hellscream, and he's the warchief of the Horde, the "evil" faction in* World of Warcraft*. He sits in Gromash Hold, in the middle of Orgrimmar, generally "pwning" any "noobs" who are foolish enough to attack him, and at various times sending me, a stout and spritely little goblin Death Knight, out to obtain things for him—a bracelet, some war plans, a map of key gold reserves, the head of a legendary dragon named Nefarian… you know, the sort of stuff you'd find at Ye Walle Marte.*

*Garrosh has a weapon with a name. I'm not sure why, but weapons with names always impressed me, like houses with names. Why live at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue if you can live in The White House, right? Why swing just an axe when you could swing "Gorehowl." Gorehowl belonged to Garrosh's father, Grom Hellscream, the former warchief, a warrior known for having, with that very axe, slain a demi-god named Cenarius. When Grom passed on, an evil guy named Prince Malchezaar came into possession of Gorehowl and retreated with it to a haunted mansion known as Karazhan.*

*Time in the* World of Warcraft *is a funny thing. Actions can be repeated—mimetically. I'll talk more about that in a little bit. But for now, let's just stick with the fact that while new things happen, and in Orgrimmar it's always "now" (whatever now is), at Karazhan, it's still Earthdate 2009, and Thrall, then the Horde warchief, hasn't come to lay a whipping to Malchezaar. So*

*inside Karazhan, right about now, there's a Malchezaar who has a 12.3% chance of dropping Gorehowl on the ground when he dies.*

*My compatriot Salty—who today is talking to me at length about how a member of our raid team "super boned" our attempt to defeat a dragon named Atramedes the night before—and I enter Karazhan—Kara as we call it, when we are Looking for More, or LFM—and quickly, never really stopping our conversation of the raid the night before, tear through the mobs that stand between us and Prince Malchezaar. Then I'm there. Tiny goblin, about three and a half feet tall, standing in front of a twelve foot tall demon prince.*

*For a moment, I want to really be there, so I speak to the Prince, as if he is like Salty and me.*

*"Pardon me, but might you have Gorehowl? I notice you're more of a dagger person, and I"*

*I stop typing. The Prince has decided to attack me. I strafe to the left—that's the "A" key in my set of keybinds—then I launch into my own attacks. Keybind 1: Obliterate. That one does what it sounds like—it obliterates things by dealing 200% weapon damage from each hand, 1, 1, 1. I'm out of runic power, a resource I need to keep obliterating, so I switch to keybind 2, Frost strike, and fling ice at the Prince. Behind me Salty is serving up lightning bolts of various sizes and shapes, summoning rock and fire elementals, and dotting the area with small totems that do all sorts of things. A button on my screen flashes. It's time to unleash a cooldown: button 10: Army of the Dead. Eight zombies emerge from the ground and join me as I 1, 1, 1… I mean obliterate… the Prince. He falls.*

*I hover my mouse over him and I right click. I wish I could say this was the first time I'd ever come to fight the Prince, but the odds according to the resource Wowhead.com are 12.3%*

*for a Gorehowl drop. In my personal practice, it would be under 10% on this attempt.*

*A small window pops up. In that window is the tiny icon of an axe. I hover my mouse over it.*


Figure 2: Gorehowl In-game Tooltip (or data info graphic)

*My name is Phill. I'm a level 85 goblin Death Knight. I have an axe named Gorehowl, and there's this NPC who looks at me, then at his own axe with a name, then at me.*

*This is the story of how I took my gaming to grad school.*

*And so it begins.*

I'm the sort of person who has always asked questions.

I grew up beside the technologies now seen as ubiquitous: digital composing and the internet—a child dialing in with Kermit to access BBS systems on my Commodore 64, coding simple animations in BASIC, video gaming—learning first to read in part through games on my Atari 2600, spending my teens chatting with people around the world through a Unix shell, over UseNet, then eventually IRC, the precursor to instant messaging. I grew up looking into screens, always asking how that screen allowed me to know and connect with others. I knew someday the screen—or more realistically the people on the other side of the screen—would speak back to me. I was always already a digital rhetorician, poking and prodding, I just didn't know the words for it yet.

I start here because in reality that's where the research presented here began. I came to rhetoric and writing as a result of my academic life, from as far back as I can remember, being about writing: fiction, newspaper stories, essays, notes, etc. My interest in teaching has always focused on fostering writing through the use of what students do—what people do. I like to go where they are, as I say so often in front of my classes. There comes with that, of course, fear of "colonization," a term I both respect and disrespect the use of as applied to scholars looking at student spaces given my own mixed-blood Cherokee experiences with colonization and being colonized. I was initially quite hesitant to think that what I had done for so long as hobby, as a social exercise, would be a ripe place for research in the field.

Then I came to a pair of realizations. The first was that starting with the work of James Paul Gee, scholars were looking at gaming as a serious thing (and later making serious games).

This meant that there was a space, and the work was going to be happening, one way or the other. The second realization was that many—in fact early on most, though the balance is slowly shifting—of the people studying games were academics that came to gaming. Many of the things they were surfacing and reflecting upon, analyzing and critiquing, were things that to gamers were quite obvious. This led to the eureka moment of realizing that my voice—as a gamer who then became a scholar—would offer a differing, contrasting view.

**The Rhetorician Looks at Gaming Studies or Why Study Gaming**

My current research is positioned in some ways on the edge, so to speak, of rhetoric scholarship. When I began researching gaming seven years ago, it was so new to the field that often half of my discussions with other scholars were about finding a seat at the table. Over the course of the last seven years there have been numerous gaming studies presentations—if not publications—and scholarly discussions in rhetoric and in composition studies, a trend I suspect will continue. Still, I am sure that to some the study of rhetoric and writing and the study of video games might seem an ill fit.

In the case of my own work, the junction is apparent: my interest is in looking at how gamers learn, collaborate, and create while achieving goals. While this might be happening in a space that is uncommon for the discipline (though it grows more commonplace with each day), the themes of rich discussion and consideration are in fact the same themes and ideas that are foundational to contemporary study in rhetoric and writing:

1) **Literacy acquisition**: gamers must learn not only the game, but also how to communicate with others in the game using a specific language and specific modes of

discourse. Gamers must also learn complex interactive collaborative procedures that mimic the learning of things as commonplace as tying shoes or signing a document to as complex as assembling a model automobile or drawing a map of a neighborhood.

2) **Collaboration**: just as rhetoric itself emerged as a discipline from the Greek tradition, rhetoric has frequently stopped to consider the process of persuasion and concession that is involved in making decisions/working together in what would appear to be harmony. These same mechanisms are critical in gaming: a group that doesn't operate in harmonious collaboration will be met, over and over, with less-than-optimal results (and often failure).
3) **Working to build a collaborative "thing"**: studies in rhetoric and composition have often focused on the collaborative working (particularly writing) process. While this one might seem like a stretch to the casual observer, gamers often work to build collaborative stories while approaching "progression." Progression, in the sense of an MMORPG, is different than how others in the discipline might view that word. Progression—a listing of how many encounters successfully completed by a group—is a tangible thing. Gamers, essentially, come together to do stuff.
4) Particularly in computers and writing, but also in rhetoric proper, scholars have taken a profound interest in how information is received and transmitted in digital spaces (now we read and write on the web, what multi-modality does to familiar texts and methods of conversation, etc.). **Gaming is a showcase for multi-modality**, from the actual game experience to the spaces where gamers go to discuss, research and share game related material (blogs, YouTube, message boards, etc.)

5) In the areas that surround the game (what I have in my other work termed "extra-gaming" activities) gamers also serve as a powerful example of how what Marc Prensky (2006), I would say "dangerously," coined as "digital natives" behave online. While arguments can—and should—be made that scary and dangerous (at times, even, careless) assumptions are made about younger people in relation to technology, **the stereotype of 'digital native' seems, based on my own research and the findings of others, to apply correctly to gamers**. Most are highly digitally literate and navigate online spaces with relative ease.

These five points anchor my work within the discipline of rhetoric and writing, but they also shine the light on what it is that brought me to study gaming in the first place. As I believe is true of all academics, I wear many hats. But long before I wore the hat of "academic," I wore the hat of "gamer." I have argued in the past, and mentioned above, that this inversion is of critical importance to studying gaming. This is not a claim, nor have I ever claimed, that being a gamer first is "better." That is a value judgment that not only would I not make but I also do not see value in discussing ("better" here isn't relevant—there is no need to place either one above the other). What is true is that it is a *different* perspective. And gaming, from the eyes of the lifelong gamer, is a place where all these things that our field values (collaboration, literacy acquisition, persuasion, the development of narratives in the literal sense, composing and communicating in digital spaces, etc.) happen. As someone who has now taught for a decade in our field, and was, before that, a writing center tutor and teacher's assistant for three years, I have seen literally thousands of students and their work. Many of those students viewed the work of our discipline—just as many workers in general view their jobs—as drudgery. But some

of those same people replicate the same practices in gaming space for fun, paying to for the right to do so. It would be unrealistic to think that 11.5 million people might ever join in a collaborative writing project as a hobby, but that many people play *World of Warcraft*, paying their $15 a month, their $40 per expansion, and often more just to be able to be a part of that practice.

There's a power in the fact that this is play and it facilitates the same things that we as a field so greatly value and, appropriately, spend so much of our time studying, discussing and otherwise pursuing. Something about how the game environment works makes it all "fun." And that fun, if it can be isolated and/or replicated in other places has to be of value to the field (and to other fields). That is what I'm seeking in my research. That's where I want to go.

In many ways, the work of this study is a continuation from my Master's thesis which was greatly inspired and influenced by the work done by James Gee (2003) in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Gee himself has gone on to write several other pieces on gaming which expand on his central ideas, but the unspoken challenge in his work—one that was touched upon by TL Taylor's (2006) book *Play Between Worlds*—is for the next set of scholars to move from the focus on the individual learner and move toward the collaborative learner. Gee's work expertly illustrates how gaming leads a gamer to several valuable literacy skills, something I will discuss much more specifically in later chapters. Due to the fact that Gee's focus was on literacy acquisition first and foremost, though, he only in rare cases mentions a second player or another player in an online world. Taylor, on the other hand, focuses specifically on looking at the denizens of an online world (*Everquest*), and their

interactions in the real world, but again due to the scope of her study her research only touches in places on the in-game interactivity of groups.

What I have attempted to cultivate is an expansion from Gee's work, a full consideration of how literacy functions in gaming spaces. When discussing literacy, I chose to turn specifically to Stuart Selber (2004) and his work looking at computer literacies in general, focusing them down and refining for the study of games and gamers.

When I say *gaming literacies*, what I mean are the literacies represented by table 1 and 2 below (the first of which is from Stuart Selber's *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* and the second of which is my own reformulation of Selber's categories). Selber (2004) claims that literacy is "not a monolithic or static phenomenon with predictable consequences," indicating scholars must avoid the desire to convert literacy into something too fixed and concrete (p. 4), but at the same time he utilizes in his work the fact that literacy is often contrasted to a negative state called "illiteracy." For my purposes, I am referring to *literacy* not simply as the ability to "read" a game but rather as the entire skill set of reading, composing, and interacting with the game. As Gee (2003) wrote, "when you read [think], you are always reading [thinking about] something in some way. You are never just reading 'in general' but not reading anything in particular" (p. 1). And as Elizabeth Tebeux (1996) asserted, "Literacy is no longer just the ability to read and write, but the ability to grasp intellectually and then link concepts, to turn data into information and information into knowledge that can be communicated in a variety of textual forms" (p. 40). In that spirit I approach gaming literacy as the learning and practicing of everything a gamer must *do* in order to "play" the game in question.

In *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Selber (2004) posited that there are three computer literacies: functional, critical and rhetorical. Paralleling Selber's triad, I believe there are there are three types of online gaming literacy that I identify and describe below. This heuristic has served me well over years of researching gamers.

| Category | Metaphor | Subject position | Objective |
|---|---|---|---|
| Functional literacy | Computers as tools | Students as users of technology | Effective employment |
| Critical literacy | Computers as cultural artifacts | Students as questioners of technology | Informed critique |
| Rhetorical literacy | Computers as hypertextual media | Students as producers of technology | Reflective praxis |

Table 1. Selber's (2004) Conceptual Landscape of a Computer Multiliteracies Program(from *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, p. 25)

| Category | Metaphor | Subject Position | Objective |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interface Literacy | Video game as rule set | Gamer as agent in gaming world | Mastery of interface |
| Toon Literacy | "Masked player" as element of game | Gamer as protagonist/hero | understanding as players in game environment |
| Collaboration Literacy | character as part of a functioning game community | Gamer as member of larger gaming culture | Membership in a complex discourse community |

Table 2. Gaming Literacies in a Selber-Inspired Relationship (Alexander, 2007)

While I could have borrowed Selber's "functional," I prefer to refer to the first gaming literacy as *interface literacy*. I make this distinction because Selber's term "functional" indicates

that the user is capable of doing work with the computer, but in the case of *interface* online gaming literacy one can function as an end user, but one cannot yet truly *play* the game, much in the way that someone with a recipe and utensils is close to cooking but cannot, without putting everything together, prepare a meal. Interface literacy is an understanding the game's interface, menu systems, and other strictly technical/mechanical issues so that the player gains *agency* in the gaming world, but the term "interface" here shouldn't be equated with a Graphical User Interface; I include in the ability to interface with the game all the required knowledge and skill that one brings with him or her, up until the point of actually beginning to play the game. This would include basic computer literacies, for example, that might be obscured if one hangs up too much on the use of the word "interface" as a noun and not, as I intend it, as both a noun and a verb. Interface literacy allows one to engage the game and use the input device(s) to accomplish basic in-game tasks.

I refer to the second form of gaming literacy as *toon* literacy. Toon literacy is learning/knowing one's in-game strengths and weaknesses, understanding one's in-game character (or toon), and attaining some level of mastery over that character so that one can successfully "play" *as* the in-game character. This literacy, at least initially, is developed while one gains interface literacy, but it is recursive. As toons level up, and as game situations change and patches change talent trees, toon literacy must be revisited and relearned. It is important for any player in a raiding group who wishes to succeed to "know your class!"

The final form of gaming literacy I am proposing is *collaboration* literacy. Richard Smith and Pamela Curtain (1998) suggest that video gamers form "symbolic communities" (p. 214),

noting that video games and the communities that their players form spawn jargon, styles, and attitudes. Because MMORPGs are practically impossible to play alone, the final stage of understanding comes through knowing both how to interact and what the social norms are for the gaming world or "symbolic community." In *World of Warcraft,* toons inhabit Azeroth, a three continent world filled with cities and villages that are affiliated with the Horde (or the "evil" faction), Alliance (the "good" faction), neutral, or in some cases "other/hostile." Before a player can hope to get particularly far playing *WoW*, he or she must know things like what her toon's racial home city is, which other races her toon is friendly with, what races her toon is at war with, and where safehaven can be located in times of danger. In addition to the communities formed by the game's map, however, there are the communities of the 236 servers for the game, each with a unique player base—some Player-vs.-Environment only (PVE), some Player-vs.-Player, too (PVP), some Role-Play specific (RP), and some Role-Play and PVP (RPPVP). This, of course, is the long view of what needs to be known to start to have collaborative literacy. What is focal here is knowing how to interact with the groups the player will join while gaming—from two or three person questing groups to five person dungeon groups, to 10, 25 or even the occasional 40 person raid groups. Knowing how to operate within those groups is critical to gaming success.

In reality, almost every game involves these three literacies to one degree or another. To successfully play basketball, for example, one must know that to move with the ball, one must dribble. Once the dribbling stops, so does the player's ability to move until the ball is passed or shot. That is interface literacy. In a game of basketball, toon literacy would involve learning to play a specific position and learning that within that position the player has

strengths and weaknesses within the game. For example, if one were to play point guard, she operates as the focus of ball movement and will likely call any/all plays (or relay them from the coach) and will be the person who the ball is passed to when it is time to "set up" or "move up court." Unless that point guard is Magic Johnson, it is not typically the point guard's goal to score, or even to shoot. The point guard's domain is ball movement and setting up other players to have a chance for the best possible shot. The realization of the point guard's duties to other players and within the offensive scheme then is collaboration literacy. Playing as a point guard, she needs to know that she should run the offense, should look to pass first, and is meant to be the person who sets up the scorers. Then she can "play" basketball.

Interface literacy is important to gaming as a practice, but it is also essentially the "key" to the game itself. Without basic interface literacy a gamer *cannot play* the game, and without the ability to play the game, a gamer cannot develop toon or collaboration literacy. In order to understand gaming literacies, another key element comes into play here. In her landmark work *Literacy in American Lives*, Deb Brandt (2001) introduced the field to the concept of the "literacy sponsor," a person—or an agent, as it could be a collective, an institution, or as I will argue in this chapter a communal text—who provides the means, usually through direct education but also sometimes through providing capital or connections, to acquire literacy. I take slight issue with one of Brandt's claims; I do not think that the sponsor *always* stands to gain from sponsorship, at least directly, but I understand the dynamic Brandt creates and respect her belief that sponsors always somehow benefit from their sponsorship actions. What I do find essential here is the realization that *no one* gains gaming literacy alone; while the

sponsors of their literacies might vary widely, any group of gamers is sure to exhibit numerous paths to entry into the game environment and acquisition of needed skills.

I have presented this gaming literacy framework at conferences, and have utilized it in publication, with some success, but it often draws questions from gaming studies folks about "what side I'm on." Which leads to another key consideration when doing gaming studies work: work in gaming studies as a sub-discipline aligns with a dichotomy where in people are often viewed as "one of the other" depending on their side in the debate between narratology and ludology.

**Time to Play the Ludus: A Gaming Studies Story**

Gaming studies has, since before it was *technically* considered a field, existed primarily as a debate between two schools of thought: ludologists (not to be confused with or mistaken for luddites[1]) and narratologists. Ludology "(from *ludus*, the Latin word for 'game'), [refers] to the yet non-existent 'discipline that studies game and play activities'" (Frasca, 1999). Though on the surface, Frasca's initial definition might not reflect the complete scope of the evolution of the school of thought over the past decade, the implication here is that games must be studied "as games" and often extends to "as coded systems" or "as rule systems."

The other side of the classic gaming studies split is "narrative" or "narratology." The work done in narrative game studies would seem very much at home in literature and cultural studies programs: the focus most frequently turns to looking at the narrative the game shares,

[1] Luddites, of course, are those who reject/resist technology. Historically the term emerges from textile workers during the British industrial revolution and the fictional King Ludd.

or in other words the story it tells in a traditionally linear way in which the gamer is active playing the game but is usually passive to change the narrative in any significant way, much like studies of film and television in particular. These moments of focusing upon the story being told are then used as hooks for different sorts of critique ("Why does the princess always need to be saved?" "why do we always shoot at aliens?" "is there some other way to solve the problem that doesn't involve stealing the car and/or killing the prostitute?"). The body of work that does this sort of research and study is substantial, well-written, highly interdisciplinary (in spite of a seemingly English-studies-centric focus on narrative), and offers a fantastic foundation for anyone seeking to do work in gaming studies as an emerging field. To refer to narrative as a story being told-- in the way that literature has classically, in the ways that film studies does, etc.-- would be not only accepted but well received and quickly added to discussion in gaming studies (see, for example, Aldrich, 2005; Arnseth, 2006; Beavis, 1998, 2004; Consalvo, 2007; Gee, 2004; McAllister, 2004; Presnky, 2001 and Wolf, 2001).

What I am particularly interested in, however, is something that was raised seemingly at the genesis of the gaming studies "split" but has been left largely uncommented upon. The 1999 piece I quoted earlier by Gonzolo Frasca appears to be the first application (and coining) of the term "ludology." One might reason, then, that this was also the genesis moment of ludology/narratology existing in any sort of binary (as the article is titled "ludology meets narratology"). In the article Frasca argues quite deftly for a different sort of gaming studies-- one that isn't locked up in narrative.

But he offers this as well:

The concept of *ludus* can be helpful to understand the relationship between this particular kind of entertainment and narrative.

*Ludus* have a defined set of rules. These rules can be transcribed, and easily transmitted among different players. Sometimes, rules are backed up by organizations that define their rules, like FIFA for soccer.

Based on our previous definition, we can easily describe the *ludus* process as follows:

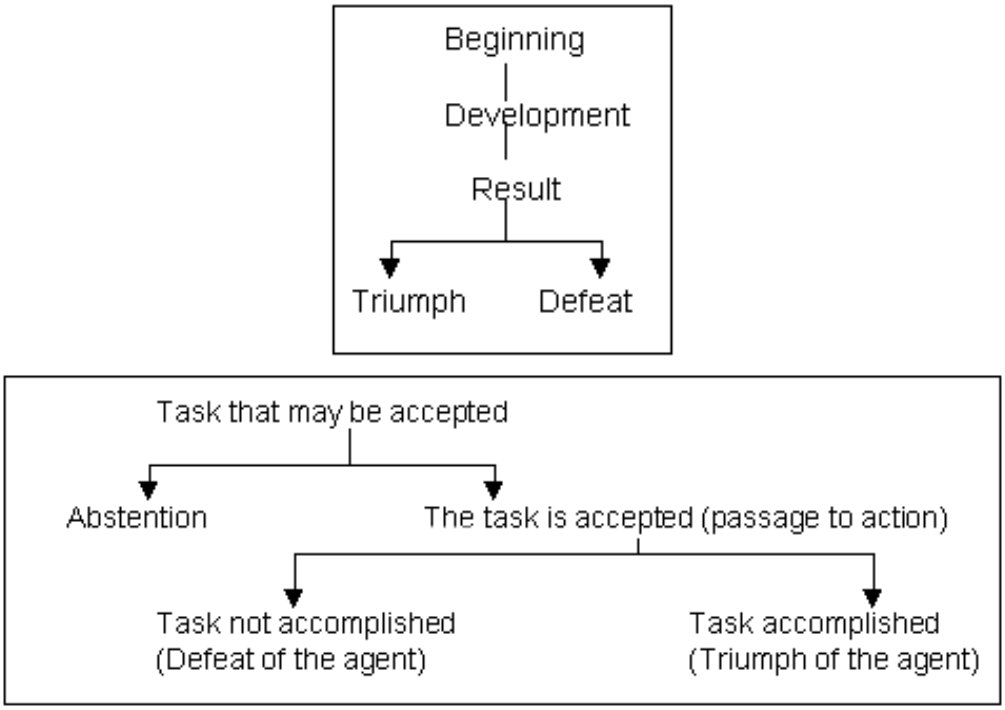


Figure 3: The Ludus (from Frasca, 1999)

... Thus, we cannot claim that *ludus* and narrative are equivalent, because the first is a set of possibilities, while the second is a set of chained actions... What

> seems to be similar in structure are the [gaming] *session* and the [narrative] *sequence*. However, that does not mean that they are the same thing.

Frasca's assertion is that narrative and play are similar, and function in similar ways, but that to call them the same thing is incorrect. While this makes perfect sense, and Frasca elaborates with examples that point out how the gaming session, the decisions, the flow of events, the movement toward a goal, is like a narrative sequence—he also makes clear that this isn't "just" a narrative because there is a ludus—a game—involved. This blend is important to understanding how my work, involving memes which I explain later in this chapter, utilizes what can be communicated by storytelling and what follows a sequence like a narrative, is actually as much about the goals of the game and the actions of the players as it is about following a narrative arc. This fusion of the two concepts is something I believe gaming studies needs more of if it wishes to move deeper into rich, incisive work. Most contemporary ludologists fixate on rule sets and code while narratologists continue to look at narrative as a linear product of the game's producers, but the crossover is sparse.

So I propose here a sort of bridging work that needs to be done in gaming studies with regard to how scholars and gamers understand action in the gaming world. A large portion of my motivation here comes from my own theoretical stance toward what "narrative" is and means, as I use the word in ways that are different from both gaming studies and English/literary studies. I came to my studies as a scholar of rhetoric and composition from an undergraduate career as a creative writer and a childhood filled with self-publishing, journalism, and notebooks full of stories and reflections. I carry with me an understanding of

narrative as telling stories from the perspective of a “narrator,” a simplified definition of the term but one I find valid and useful when looking at gaming and particularly at how gamers talk about their gaming. Narrative always seemed to be elastic to me: growing up a storyteller, I was keenly aware that the story doesn't always come out the exact same way (some do-- some MUST), and that many stories are works in progress that evolve over time, that lose sections or gain sections, that become more and less relevant. But if a number of people are telling “the same” story (e.g. “Remember that night Lenny hit the winning shot in the junior high basketball tourney?”), large elements of each retelling will remain the same, copied and replicated, almost canonized on a small scale.

To return to Frasca and gaming studies, I believe the missing piece, the thing just starting to appear in gaming studies, is the agency of gamers and what happens when they work together in all the varied spaces that gaming touches. The narratives being told—if one chooses that language— in gaming environments are a product of intense collaboration between gamers, the game itself (the rules, the software, the written words and recorded actions), the game's producers, non-human actors like the gaming machine or controllers, and any number of outside cultural elements that might on a case-by-case basis enter into the gaming process. I believe it is incorrect to look at a game as coming out of the box and having its narrative; part of the narrative-- in some cases, like with an MMORPG, most of the narrative-- is unwritten when the game itself is a "finished" product (at least in the sense that it is ready for distribution). But at the same time, games are by their very nature generally repetitive—some maddeningly so (soccer: kick the ball through the goal/stop the other team from kicking the ball through your goal; chess: trap the other team’s king)—but that is as much the game, or

the ludus, as it is a narrative. When players, and their unique traits along with all the things they've copied from others, enter the equation, complexity emerges that is difficult for either word, or school of thought, to appropriately account for without serious deviation from its *modus operandi*.

**Gaming Studies Closer to the World… of Warcraft**

Gaming studies, meanwhile, has begun the significant step toward considerations of the differences provided by perpetual world MMORPGs, most specifically, like my own study, *World of Warcraft*. Anthologies like *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (Corneliussen and Walker Rettberg, 2008) and *World of Warcraft and Philosophy* (full disclosure: I have a chapter in that collection) (Cuddy and Nordlinger, 2009) as well as a few other articles begin to make the turn toward the sort of work that scholars like myself imagine and aspire to doing. Of particular interest is the work of Lisa Nakamura, who is currently researching the act of "gold farming" (players—often from China—making virtual *World of Warcraft* money to sell, in turn, for real money). More recently still—in fact still in progress—Anne-Mette Albrechtslund (2010) writes in *Convergence* of her attempts to understand gamer narratives. Her piece focuses, as I wish to, on the stories that *World of Warcraft* gamers tell about gaming, but she makes the interesting choice here of essentially excluding in-game communication, looking instead at just forum posts made by members of a single guild. Her

research--which is still in progress-- will no doubt add to the field's understanding in interesting ways.

The step that scholarship—ludology and narratology as well as interdisciplinary workers who avoid that division by sticking to the standards of their home disciplines— is just beginning to take, however, is the same critical but complex step I lament in my own earlier work: MMORPGs are so clearly, from the gamer and producer's perspective, about collaboration and teamwork. It is, however, quite daunting to attempt to do serious, rigorous research on a group of players, as the realities of IRB approval, of finding the right mix of people who are active, engaged, willing to allow for a researcher to constantly ask questions and are willing to tolerate the researcher as a part of their group, then justifying that to do the research you must be one of the people in the group to study the group, etc. become serious obstacles in the path to this type of research.

Oft overlooked when viewing this from the outside is a reality that I've often argued myself but which is most eloquently put forward time and time again by Bonnie Nardi (2010): if you want to research MMO gamers, you better be *able* to *play* the game. And you better be good. This is particularly true in the case of my study, as there is quite literally no way (other than sitting and staring at someone else's computer and distracting them with verbal questions) to observe a raid group, and the group of players I ended up working with is quite talented. The only people in the raid instance—where the raid happens—are the ten raiders. To see how the group interacts, the researcher has to be one of the players in the group, and if the researcher—okay, if I—doesn't carry his weight, he won't be in the raid to watch the group

learn new content. This could be, I am quite sure, a point of contention for some readers, and I understand completely the concern that as a researcher my being present in the scenarios I am observing could be problematic, but, to balk at the idea of the gamer as a participant researcher is a misunderstanding of game space and ethos and of the changing reality of participant research.

This is also a place where I hope that my following in the tradition of rhetoric and writing scholars—the one that comes most frequently to mind for me is Ellen Cushman (1998) and her research for *The Struggle and The Tools* – will offer something of interest to the gaming scholarship community. As I survey gaming studies, the amount of case-study based and/or ethnographic work is sparse, with TL Taylor's study of *Everquest* players which I mentioned previously being one of the few real cases of looking at gamers as gamers doing gaming. I believe that a step away from viewing gaming studies as a design field, as serious games scholars like Sasha Barab and Ian Boghost have with great success, and more toward researching gamers as learners (as Gee and Prensky have), creators and collaborators, will offer gaming studies important new insights into how gaming happens and what gaming does for gamers. I also hope that studies like my own will encourage more members of the gaming studies community to look at how they can give back. There is, unfortunately, a dearth of research "kipple[2]" to borrow from Phillip K. Dick, in gaming discourse communities like forums, chat rooms, etc. offered up by researchers who attempt to essentially walk into the community,

[2] Kipple, in Dick's novel, is paper and other quickly used and discarded "junk," a useless element that becomes clutter. It differs in a philosophical way from spam in that spam tends to be repetitive, whereas kipple isn't, at least at its core. Kipple is just wasteful and space consuming, while spam is somehow also insipid and commercial.

grab some data, and leave. These researchers create a very real distain in the community, as I saw first-hand when trying to take two non-gamers into a gaming space to do brief interviews[3].

**An Aside: Serious Games**

I also must introduce here a philosophical difference between my work and the work of many in gaming studies, particularly those who edge closest to the fields of rhetoric and writing and technical communication, closest to the sub-discipline I would call home, computers and writing: I think there's a bit of a disconnect with the concept of "serious games" that too many scholars have, through what I will recognize is the very best of intentions, swept under the proverbial rug.: Games are fun. To the outside observer, and to the most optimistic of those in the serious games world, I just made a completely obvious and perhaps unnecessary statement. Of course games are fun, that's essentially why they exist.

Then there are what are called "serious games," or more generally speaking games made for educational purposes, to teach something or to augment training materials (be those related to school, to learning a new job, to implementation by the military or by other organizations like churches, political groups, or retailers). Unfortunately, there is often a rather significant incongruence between what serious games designers consider to be fun and what gamers consider to be fun. I won't labor this distinction here, as it is a debate for a different forum, but one of the key foci of my study is to look at a commercial game, presumed to be fun but not meant by its developers to be a serious game, due to the fact that gamers behave in specific ways when gaming that, in spite of the great efforts of serious games designers, they

[3] This was part of a paper written for a course that has not, and will not be, published.

simply do not when engaging in serious games. The reason for this is so obvious that it may sometimes go unnoticed: with the rare exception of games that happen to also fit the serious games mold (such as *Civilization*), serious games are not deployed to be consumed by gamers the way commercial or homebrew games are. As such, gamers don't pay for them and voraciously attempt to master them. Serious games are used specifically to teach, and even when that isn't explicitly stated to the gamer, most notice.

I do not mean here to speak poorly of serious games, as that is not my belief or my intent. What I do wish to stress, however, is that there is a profound difference between games designed to teach as part of an educational package and games that are designed to sell, to be fun and to be obsessed over but also happen to teach simply because a good game needs to be understood and executed. Because of this distinction—between commercial games and serious games—much of the existing scholarship in the field of gaming studies, at least as it edges toward rhetoric and writing circles, is skewed toward looking at games as a mechanism to create better serious games and/or looking at how serious games are received. My goal is to stay closer to Gee, but to expand a wider net for gamer experiences. Due to this, it may appear at times that my method of addressing games minimizes scholars who have standing in the field, people who I cite but do not dwell upon in the way that I do others. This is not meant to slight these scholars in any way. It is simply that someone like Sasha Barab or Marc Presnky, who both take in different ways as their primary focus the development and use of serious games, has much to say to gaming studies but significantly less to say to a project like mine which looks at a game that has as its goal commercial and not educational ends.

**Wrapping it Up and Setting The Course: Where Do You Want to Go Today?**

When I was finishing high school, Microsoft launched a marketing campaign through the legendary firm Wieden+Kennedy (of Nike "Just Do It" fame), which pointed to the soon-to-be-ubiquitous home computer, which then would run on Windows 95, and asked "where do want to go today.[4]" I recall thinking of it as a call to arms, so to speak, as I was among the few people in my small community—and based on statistics in the world—engaging in the use of the "internet" to connect with people. Games hadn't yet made that jump, but gamer culture and game jargon was already living on Usenet, starting to produce memes. One that is burned in my mind, but which I sadly cannot locate/recover, was an image of a man in a fishing boat. It said at the top "where do you want to go today?" and in smaller print, below the boat "it doesn't matter. You go where we tell you," above a huge Microsoft logo.

I share that reflection here because it mirrors the convergences that this introduction and this study represent. I realize that as one reads, these ideas might seem disconnected, as if they are waiting for the stitch that will pull them together and close the wound that might allow them to bleed out. But that is intentional; it reflects precisely how this study emerged and where I hope my work is going. What this introduction attempts to do is offer circumstance, history, a pointer to various key kairotic moments, and to sketch out the positions where my work tethers to and draws from existing scholarship. But this research study also does new things, and it combines the pieces here in ways that in some senses only seeing the work being

[4] This is from memory, but I checked my memory on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Where_do_you_want_to_go_today

done can bring into stark relief. The connections, which I hope are visible as a sort of skeletal system of lines and threads, a metaphorical web, can only be drawn so tight without seeing precisely what happens when the factor I keep returning to—the gamers themselves—are added to the mix. Their voice, other than as my voice, is largely absent from this introduction. As they are layered in, in the subsequent chapters, much of what I've hinted at will become clear.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation, entitled "Level 85 Goblin Researcher LFG," details my methods in conducting my research, gathering and analyzing my data, and devotes some time to an issue that is close to my heart as a scholar: research ethics. Key to the discussion here is how I became a part of the raid group I studied, and how I was able to study them and analyze the data, while still being a good fellow gamer, being respectful and forthright with them, and balancing my role as both gamer and scholar.

In Chapter 3, "Dances with Digital Worms or Welcome to the Era of Memetic Gaming, Just Like the Last Era, Just Like the Next Era, Just Like This Era," I begin the work of unfolding my use of the meme in game space, linking it here to the acquisition of gaming knowledge and the reapplication of memetic practices to "epic win" and "obtain phat lootz." This chapter uses as its primary focus a single raid encounter enhanced by considerations of other iterations of that same raid encounter, to lay the memes of the game bare and determine the gaming work they do.

Chapter 4, "'Know Your Role and (probably never) Shut Your Mouth:' Digital Identity in *World of Warcraft*," looks at how individual gamers forge digital identities both mimetically and

working at times against the memes around them. I use as a starting point Nakamura's concept of Identity Tourism, but I re-task it in a way that puts primacy on the actions of being a tourist (or not) and moves in very specific ways to distance from Nakamura's important—but sadly for my study less applicable—focus on race.

The work in that chapter leads to revelations about an emerging group digital identity which I explore in chapter 5, "'Don't be a Double Dotting Douche:' Group Identity in *World of Warcraft*," wherein I explore how a raid group—and in this case a guild, as they are one-and-the-same—come to share a communal, consistent group identity. Of particular interest here is what happens to those who try to join the group but don't fit; to say it was initially surprising would be a bit of an understatement.

And in chapter 6, I conclude, hoping that once I've circled and crossed this web, traversed its distances and drawn the threads taut, I will be able to put on display what I believe is a worthwhile, robust, multi-faceted and intellectually valuable way to look at gamers and the gaming work they do. I may also, as I am wont to do upon occasion, slay a dragon or two and upgrade my armor insignificant ways. So where do I want to go today? Azeroth. And I want you to go with me. I have a few things I'd like to show you…

## Chapter 2: Level 85 Goblin Researcher LFG

*It's been a long night in the world of* WoW *pugging; a new expansion pack, Cataclysm, is set to launch in less than a week, so the majority of players are just milling about, killing time. I have chosen to pug on this night because I have permission from my local neighborhood IRB to solicit participants for my study, and the best place to start looking for people who are in the mood to chat about the game is in the pugging community.*

*One of the people in this pug is a player I've seen before. She remembered me, and says, upon seeing me pacing in front of the first boss of Icecrown Citadel, a multi-armed flying monstrosity called Lord Marrowgar, "OMG! Tanking again this week?"*

*"Yeah. How are you?" I remembered, as I launched myself into the boss, blades flying, that I'd spoken with this player—who in my study would end up being known as Sally—the previous week about my penchant for making sure my gear matched, something she said she also cared about, but which she thought was a little quirky "for a dude." I then told her, during a lull in the action, about my experiences with my female rogue toon and an embarrassing situation wherein someone thought I was actually a female IRL.*

*"Good. On a spike, but good." She was, indeed, on a spike in game, which was nothing the seven DPS couldn't make quick work of.*

*"Remember how I was telling you that I wrote an essay about a guild mistaking me for female?"*

*"Oh, right, your nerd adventures."*

*My axe cleaves the creature's head off. He falls to the ground, and we begin to scavenge from him anything we deem useful.*

*"I'm working on another project…" Ghouls approach from the left. I leap into them, spewing icy fog everywhere.*

*"Oh?"*

*"Think you'd be interested in maybe participating?"*

*"Lol. What would I be getting myself into?"*

*I stop, swapping my axes for a huge mace before walking into the next room, "let me send you a weblink. You can read about it and let me know. No pressure, of course."*

*One down…*

**I'm Going In: Who's the Death Knight with the Notepad?**

At the heart of it, this study is about me, as a researcher, knowing that there was something important happening in a particular space and diving in, confident that I would find at least some of the valuable lessons that WoW raiding has to offer. In this chapter I explain my methodology, touching not just on the tools that I developed as I combed over my data—the most significant of which, I believe is a heuristic for observation of practices based on the meme—but also touches on important issues of ethics and responsibility when researching gaming. I also at times will be quite candid here about decisions I made during my research, as I believe there is much to be learned from the choices—and the logic behind the choices—made doing research in what is still a relatively unexplored space. It is my hope that others will benefit from the accounts of my choices, even if one or another might disagree with my logic and the approaches I took. I also present here what are in some ways conclusions, as I wish to share, before discussing my data, the trends and ideas that emerged from that data, using those as a springboard into the body of this research project.

I started this study knowing that I wanted to look at the dynamics between members of a raid group, so the first step to that process was getting myself "raid ready" and finding a group. I assert here that leveling, learning, and locating the group was the only way to begin, as I clearly wanted to design the study and think about what it was I hoped to discover, but none of that would really matter if I couldn't play the game well enough to do the research in the first place. And leveling and gearing was going to give me plenty of time to think.

This led me, though, to a few moments of pre-study philosophical crisis. I was targeting—and eventually ended up working with—a raid group consisting of ten players, most of which were consenting participants in my study. How would I not potentially taint the data if I am looking at how the group learns and there's something I figure out first, or something just happen to know that they don't? It would be a fallacy to claim I could be objective, but how do I maintain enough distance that I'm still a rigorous scholar and not just another raider who happens to be taking notes?

An easy answer would be to avoid volunteering anything or taking on key jobs, to just watch. But ethically I couldn't live with that as a decision, because that's the same as asking the group to suffer being—to use a game term—"gimped" so that they have to "carry" someone. I couldn't, from my own ethical standpoint, not do my best and hence cause the group to underachieve. Luckily, there would end up being no instances wherein I alone had information that would critically change the flow of events, but I made the conscious decision to not hold back from participating in discussions of strategy, or even from socializing during raids, because in the end my position in this study has to live by a dual bind: I am researching, but I'm researching a group, and I am—whether I'm wearing researcher hat or gamer hat—part of the group itself. It would be inaccurate to study the group and withhold my input, just as it would be inaccurate for me to not recognize, from the very beginning, that while I am not studying myself as any sort of focal participant, I am in my study. Luckily things were rarely about me in terms of raid discussion or raid evolution. In the end, thanks to my preparation, in most moments by their own account it didn't seem as if I was researching them at all; we raided, then we talked about it.

I found my participants by amazingly advantageous timing. Upon completing my IRB paperwork and getting clearance to solicit participants, I logged into the game one night and tossed up a quick message in the public trade chat channel. It just so happened a group of nine people—in a small guild—needed a tenth to run that night, and one of them had talked to me about my study in a pug the night before. Through her—and our initial discussion, which I used to open this chapter—I recruited a total of seven participants, some of whom I'd lose along the way, as I will explain in the coming chapters. Of course this left a question hanging in the air, both for me and for them. Here's this goblin with these axes, and he's ready to chop some stuff up and talk to us, but what exactly is he trying to do? Well, other than kill dragons. Clearly he's come to kill dragons.

**Something Happened on the Way to the Raid**

Let me take a short step back into that long period of leveling and gear grinding. I have, as a gamer, always been someone who tries to pick the game apart, and as I'm sure any of my readers who have engaged in graduate education know, if there's one thing graduate seminar classes do to the human brain it's the surge of encouragement to scrutinize and critique. So for a period of my life I was reading voraciously and playing at least four—if not more—hours of *WoW* a night. I was trying to unravel it, making endless *Matrix* metaphors in my mind which had much to do with my reading of Baudrillard and which shapes a portion of this work. At times, I'd need a break. When one turns his usual hobby into work, ironically, checking his work email becomes his play time. And it was while emailing my students one night that a portion of this project came into stark relief.

I was speaking to my students about genre conventions, and I promised them I'd find something funny to use as an example. So I Rickroll'd[5] my students. Rickrolling, for those who might not be familiar, is the practice of sending a video or other link which either leads to Rick Astley's performance of "Never Gonna Give you Up" or even better a video that begins normally then suddenly springs Rick Astley upon the audience like a can of nuts with a spring snake inside. The Rickroll, I explained to my students, is an example of an internet meme: a formulaic replication and retransmission of someone's original Rick Astley prank. It begins and spreads, changing slightly but retaining its basic structure. Happy with my explanation to my students, I alt-tabbed back to *WoW* and went off to gather ten rhino horns for a shaman, thinking about how earlier I had gathered seven scorpion stingers for a mage in another town. And then it hit me: the game itself was memetic. As a structural unit, the meme can be used not only to observe in-game behavior but to chart gamer activity as they move toward goals. So what is a meme, precisely?

**The Meme**

*A (brief) History of Memetics and the Meme*

Memetics, and the meme, at least as specific theoretical structures, find their origin in chapter 11 of Richard Dawkins's (1976) book *The Selfish Gene*. The chapter, entitled "Memes: the new Replicators," places the meme in contrast with the gene (and the replication processes undertaken by DNA, which is something that will be far more scientific than I wish to tackle). Dawkins (1976) writes:

[5] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rickroll for more Rickroll information

> We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. `Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like `gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to `memory', or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with `cream'.
>
> Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches… memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passed it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. As my colleague N.K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter: `... memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.

While the definition here leans in specific ways toward the biological, the idea of replication is applicable across fields.

A few careful steps have to be taken to move from what Dawkins is talking about to a more computers and writing/rhetoric based understanding of the meme, but the basics are

well encapsulated in this more scientific understanding. Other scholars, such as Susan Blackmore (2008), will tie the meme back to Charles Darwin, asserting that an understanding of memetics is linked intrinsically to Darwin's natural selection and the concept of "social Darwinism." Blackmore's definition of the meme, however, leans nicely away from the biological undertones of Dawkins. She defines the meme as:

> The whole science of memetics is much maligned, much misunderstood, much feared. But a lot of these problems can be avoided by remembering the definition. A meme is not equivalent to an idea. It's not an idea, it's not equivalent to anything else, really. Stick with the definition. *It's that which is imitated. Or information which is copied from person to person.* (my emphasis)

While still asserting a place for memetics as a science, Blackmore instantly brings in the mundane, offering the example of toilet paper as an idea that has been replicated. Her moves to insure a concrete understanding of the meme as ubiquitous are useful to scholars like myself who might wish to take memetics in slightly different direction. In her book *The Meme Machine*, Blackmore (2000) builds a definition of the meme that actually asserts that instead of the meme being "like" a gene, genes are in fact "like" memes, as memes are the "universal replicators" which fulfill the following criteria: high fidelity replication, multiple replications, and longevity of existence.[6]

[6] It is critical to mention Blackmore here because her work is a part of the discussion of memetics, but I find her assertions, at least on the base level, a little too grand and all-

Francis Heylighen (2004), a philosophy scholar and member of the Principia Cybernetica project (an interdisciplinary group looking at technology and human cognition), expands on the basic definition of the meme by laying out for it a four stage process of replication, consisting of "assimilation," "retention," "expression," and "transmission." He also asserts four types of criteria for consideration of memes: "*objective*: selection by phenomena or objects independent of the hosts and memes involved in the process ," "*subjective*: selection by the subject who assimilates the meme ," "*intersubjective*: selection through the interactions between different subjects," and "*meme-centered*: selection on the level of the meme itself." He then asserts that a meme's fidelity can be determined via the following equation: $F(m) = A(m) \cdot R(m) \cdot E(m) \cdot T(m)$.

There is, as well, a now abandoned *Journal of Memetics* (available online at http://cfpm.org/jom-emit/). Many of the articles there rehash and restate the same material I have mentioned thus far. They start by tying the meme, through Dawkins (who is universally in this literature referred to as the origin of the name, if not the idea, of the meme) to Darwin then make moves to step at least a bit—some more than others—away from the biological terminology and to apply the meme to other fields of study. A quick search of journal articles shows that the meme's greatest propagation as a term in study is in physics and math, as many studies are being done relating to memetic equations. Less, thus far, has been done in the social sciences and humanities.

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encompassing to be truly useful. If the meme is everything, it turns into nothing, too.

*Meme Ideas and the Meme closer to our discipline*

Blackmore (2008) makes a step that most other scholars have not; she attempts to specify a different kind of meme brought about by technology (specifically digital technology). She names this the "teme," describing them as techomemes and attempting to differentiate how technology changes the ability to copy and replicate. This idea is certainly interesting, but it is difficult to not read it as inconsistent when Blackmore herself asserted the dominance of the meme over the gene (which angered scientists and brought considerable "no, that can't be right" critiques) but now wants to assert that technology provides "a third replicator" that wouldn't be strictly memetic. At the same time, it is difficult to criticize what is only part of a twenty minute lecture, and the idea certainly has merit in the greater scientific argument about memetics.

Another interesting treatment of the meme appears in the work of Matthew Fuller (2005). In *Media Ecologies*, Fuller defines the meme without going so specifically back to science (at least when he first introduces the term). He defines the meme as:

> the base unit of cultural formation and change. It is a "replicator" that accounts for both continuity and variation in words, styles, ideas…memes are subject to the possibility of constant mutation as they pass from person to person and media to media. (111).

He adds to this by stating that ""the activity of the replicator is essentially to make copies of itself. Variation may or may not occur in such replication," (111). These moves make the meme a bit easier to digest for the non-science-minded reader, and Fuller's definition also makes the

link between what Dawkins and Blackmore talk about on a sometimes high and sometimes mundane level and something like LolCats much clearer: the focus is on the replication. In this sense one might even simplify memetics so much as to compare it to a copy machine in a standard office: copies usually look "about" the same as the original, but there's a slight degradation in quality (particularly for images, or if something else gets on the screen) that will continue each time the item is copied from a copy. Memes replicate and change, but they only change as a result of modification while copying.

To dig closer, still, into the discipline, I attempted to find any computers and writing/rhetoric proper articles about the meme or memetics. With the disclaimer that I did this utilizing databases (which ironically, for my study, rely on memetic replication and repeated key words), I had very little success finding mentions of the meme in rhetoric, technical communication, or computers and writing. This doesn't make me believe that people aren't somehow using memetics, but it does lead me to confidently say that the terminology and the scientific background of the term is relatively rarely invoked in our field. The only actual instance I found of the term memetics being used in the field was in an article in *Computers and Composition* by Joe Amato (1992), and all Amato does is reference Dawkins and memes in a long list of technological and scientific ideas that he has considered in attempting to find his place in the field of professional writing, almost as a throw-away moment. This indicates to me that scholars have thought about the usefulness of memes in the field, but there was no actual application of the ideas in the Amato piece and aren't any specific uses of "meme" or "memetics" that are highly visible in the current C&W literature.

In a 2004 piece in the *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, Yuzuru Tanaka, Kimihito Ito and Daisuke Kurosaki write of "Meme media architectures for re-editing and redistributing intellectual assets over the Web." This piece uses memetics in a straight-forward but useful way: the authors assert the value of a system that would allow users to create content in one place then publish in multiple places. While the authors could not have anticipated what exists now (since web technology has exploded), I believe what they theorize and propose in this article is one step removed from services like Digg or Glue, where the idea of a filter website is modified into a sort of catch-all replicator, or a collaborative meme basket, if one wishes to get creative with terms.

Another place where memetics is hinted at but not specifically stated is in Bronwyn Williams's (2008) "What South Park Character Are you?" Williams uses Henry Jenkins (2006, 2008) as a focal lens – a move I make later in this work— thinking about how the concept of convergence culture and poplar media shape student use of social networking sites.[7] What is in the text but not teased out in this specific way (due no doubt only to the focus Williams chose) is that the students he looks at, through their participation in convergence culture, do memetic work. The same could be said for newer *C&C* articles like "Palin/Pathos/Peter Griffin" by Abby Dubisar and Jason Palmeri (2010) and even "'*Twilight* is so anti-feminist that I want to cry:' *Twilight* fans finding and defining feminism on the World Wide Web" by Sarah Summers (2010). That memetics isn't specifically called out and labeled here is about authorial choice; the

[7] I will return, at times, to Jenkins, but the basis for his concept of convergence culture is that digital media—television, radio, internet, gaming, texting, etc.—all converge in a prosumer cultural mix, wherein users both consume and create, within a large pool created by what is essentially the marriage of technologically accessible environs and popular culture.

concepts, at least in part, are present. I could no doubt further populate this list by going over the history of *C&C* and *Kairos*, but for now I will leave these few as examples of where memetics appears.

*Criticism of the Meme*

While many commentators refer to memetics as a maligned science, it seems the actual criticisms are powerful but minimal. The single greatest criticism is of Dawkins himself: his peers refer to his proposal of the meme as anything from pseudoscience to difficult to quantify. This criticism makes a great deal of sense to me, but I think taking one step away from biology, it is not that difficult to quantify memes; the internet is full of self-proclaimed memes that actually do fulfill the definition of the term. The thinking behind the meme works well to describe things related to mass production or digital reproduction.

A second serious criticism comes as a result of Blackmore attempting in *The Meme Machine* to place the meme above the gene, essentially claiming that human genetics was "just" memetic. And that criticism, from what I can tell, is mostly about the same scientific community that criticized Dawkins essentially saying, "oh no you don't" to an attempt to replace what they considered well established law—study of the gene and genetics—with something more theoretical. Again, their criticism makes good sense to me, but it seems much less important to a scholar working outside of science, as I do not foresee attempting to replace any existing, tested laws in our field with my use of the meme.

A final criticism, also lodged primarily toward Blackmore, is that if one takes the idea of replication "literally" and we consider the meme to be the ultimate replicator, and hence the

dominant way that anything and everything transmits, it contradicts the idea of free will. While I understand this concern, I think it's an absolutist sort of argument; the meme doesn't have a motivation other than to replicate. To think that this removes free will seems like a high minded philosopher's argument wherein the nature of memetics would need to be dominating. One is free to ignore the meme, as I understand it, so I do not see it as a serious threat to free will.

*My (Re)Application of the Meme: Building a Lens*

One of the issues of this study was that I wanted to look really at a set of practices, but it's difficult to freeze those practices into something observable and re-relatable. Enter the meme. My consideration of the meme is only slightly different from what I've summarized here, but the differences are key. For example, I see memes as discreet, meaning they have set bounds, but in the sense of gaming I can see evolving meme chains—or what Blackmore calls a memeplex, though I don't think I like her exact description in concert with what I'm proposing—in gaming. What I am interested in is what is sort of left to the wayside in some of these discussions of memetics: I'm interested in the replication *combined* with the changes over time. While I wouldn't attempt to claim that the changing nature of memes isn't present in all of this literature (because it is), I would argue that in the more scientific study of memetics the "mutation" is the sort of "ends," meaning that a meme proceeds to a moment of mutation then isn't the meme anymore, and the bulk of the theoretical focus is on the replicating machine itself.

I wish to instead propose the meme as both a replicating machine and a tool of sorts. Allow me to offer an example. *World of Warcraft* (and really all MMORPGs) runs on a system wherein there is a free world to roam, there are quests, then there are dungeons and raids. The

free roaming world is essentially a visual chat room with the ability to fight things and/or pick, mine, fish, sew or skin things, but all the processes other than chat are very standardized and repeatable: for example when I skin a dead animal, it's walk over to the animal, right click, wait, right click—it's memetic. If I kill ten boar, I then do this same skinning meme ten times. Then there are quests, which are again, memetic; I would argue they are memetic on two levels: the quests follow a set of repeated patterns, such as "get me X of Y" or "go to X place and talk to/kill/save Y" but they are also, on an individual level, the same repeated quest for each person who participates. Then likewise a dungeon or raid "instance" is one "instance" of a set of boss encounters. It will be the same every time someone attempts it, other than variations in timing and group make up. For example if I, tonight, go to the Utgarde Pinnacle dungeon, there will be a boss encounter with Lord Skaldi where me and the other four people I am playing with will have to shoot Skaldi with five harpoons, he will jump off of his dragon, then we will fight him until we have won, or he has won. He will, every 30 seconds, do a whirlwind attack that will kill anyone who is too close to him. He will, when defeated, "drop" one of a set of five items based on a random number generator. This will be true if someone sitting next to me, in a different group of five, goes to face Skaldi. It will be true if me, that other person, or some other third party goes to Utgarde Pinnacle tomorrow. Or the next day. So the encounters are memetic. And likewise, the strategies that people develop for successfully completing these encounters become memes. Those memes—the ones generated by players for addressing situations—can then be passed on as a sort of capital or perhaps bound into a set of what one might go so far as to refer to as literacies.

This is why I'm interested in the "differences," or more appropriately the nuance, as much as I am in the replicated parts of the gaming experience. I'm not sure where I'd find a number, but logic dictates that there are at least hundreds of thousands[8] of raid "groups," not including pick-up groups that form spontaneously, in the *World of Warcraft*. All of those groups are taking on roughly the same mimetically shaped content each week (at different rates of progression, but generally speaking one Icecrown Citadel raid will have the same bosses and encounters as another). And due to this, dominant strategies emerge for handling various encounters. But there is a significant amount of variation in how these encounters are handled and addressed by players—variations in the amount of communication, in the methods of attack, in the roles taken, in the composition of what types of players and toons do what types of thing, etc. which will be highlighted within these pages. And this variation is something that Blizzard, *WoW*'s producers, have publically mentioned as something they want to increase through changes in how toon abilities work (at their annual Blizzcon gathering, as well as on their message boards this is/was a major point of discussion). The game encourages creativity and collaboration to address memetic situations[9]. Due to this, I think memetics is a powerful lens for looking at collaborative gaming.

[8] If there are 12 million players, one cannot assume that all or even most of them raid, but if half of them did, that would be 240, 000 raid groups. I don't think this is a number anyone will ever be able to determine, but I think it's safe to assume that there are at least 100,000, just for the sake of illustrating volume.

[9] This is not to say Blizzard would use the term "memetic." They, in fact, have not in any place I've ever seen. I use it here to complete the thought as clearly as possible.

*Layering in Activity Theory and Developing a Meme Tool*

The meme becomes particularly useful as an observational unit when married to activity theory. While activity theory finds its initial roots in psychology, I believe the observational units it chooses and the processes it stresses are conducive to the study of online games and memetics. In its most useful form for my purposes, activity theory, via Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi (1996), looks at how any activity can be broken down into actions then into operations, a framework that has worked exceptionally well for those studying Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and hence logically should work well in a gaming environment. This of course compliments the more traditional activity theory view, posited by Alexi Leont'ev, that human beings engage in *actions* that only make sense when viewed in the social context of *activities*-- in this construction activities do work or satisfy needs while actions are the constituent pieces that make up activities.

That act of gaming is what activity theory would call an *activity*-- it's meant to do work and satisfy a need. That means that what I will be looking at, and looking for, are indicators or products of actions (which I literally think of more as practices, to follow from de Certeau via Johnson, theories I will touch on later), operations and interactions that constitute the activity that is the game meme. It is logical to me that anything that is an episodic, collaborative, and networked will happen in bursts of action. It also makes sense that these actions will be repeatable and replicable, and over time gamers will build a set of understandings – in the form of memes—that can be shared and discussed, modified and enacted

And this brings me to what I think is a critical moment: defining the "meme" in this context. Here I have chosen to follow the lead of linguist M. M. Bakhtin (1985). I wish to borrow here *from* his definition of the "utterance;" I do not wish to utilize it *literally*, but what I am doing instead is borrowing a portion the *structure* of Bakhtin's utterance for my "meme." I am not saying that memes are utterances (though it makes perfect sense that utterances *could* be memetic), but rather that the two are structured similarly.

What I am interested in from Bakhtin's work is how he manages in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* to define a speech utterance as discreet and contained but also calling for a response. It is in this spirit that I would define the meme as I wish to study it in gaming space: *a meme is a set of repeatable acts that are meant to achieve a single goal while inviting further action*. This, of course, means that memes can chain into long meme-strands. These memes would represent the storage of actions, the transmission of activity—or work— from one person to another.

So my unit of observation, when looking at my research data, is the meme, a matrix of actions would need to do the following:

1. Replicate (another action, a physical thing, a structure)
2. Achieve a clear goal completely
3. Be discreet and in some way self-sufficient
4. Be transmittable (replicable)
5. Encourage some other action (be that to replicate, to continue to a similar task, etc.)

| Does it do at least ***one*** of these? | While doing all of these? | |
|---|---|---|
| Structure Gaming Activity? | Replicate (another action, a physical thing, a structure) | |
| Contribute to developing a gaming identity? | Achieve a clear goal completely | **MEME!** |
| Transmit knowledge/teach a gamer how to do something? | It is discrete and in some way self-sufficient | |
| Create/reinforce collaborative activity? | It is transmittable (replicable) | |
| | Encourage some other action | |

Table 3. Meme Tool

Allow me to offer an example: a group of five was about to face a heroic dungeon boss that only one player in the group of five had faced before, an NPC named Karsh Steelbender. A quick description of the room (as it matters to understanding the meme): there is a circular forge with flames emerging from it in the center of the room, and Steelbender walks in a circle around it before he is engaged by players. The experienced player asked the group "anyone need an overview of the boss?" and upon being told "yes," offered the following, in a monologue.

**Gamer X:** Okay, the tank has to kite Karsh in a sort of box shape around that circle, so he gets dipped into the fire every few seconds.

**Gamer X:** He will have a debuff when the fire hits him. It has to be refreshed. If that debuff ticks

off, he'll kill us.

**Gamer X:** See the circle under us?

At this point, I need to describe what the gamer did on screen. The place where we were standing, on the landing of a staircase, had a circle roughly the size of the forge in the main room. Gamer X tossed an in-game smoke flare so that it landed at the edge of the circle)

**Gamer X:** you want to tank here (he positioned himself relative to the flare) and taunt so he follows you (and he steps to the side) here. Then here (he continued to move in a square around the circle so that the "boss" would cross in a sort of V pattern going through the "fire" every few seconds).

**Gamer X:** The DPS wants to be here (he tossed another flare to one corner) and I will heal from here (he tossed a flare to the opposite corner).

**Gamer X:** Got it?

This is one example of how a gaming meme functions, and it is also, in terms of my research, what the representation of a meme would "look" like. Gamer X here has described, through actions and narration, a single defined strategy for the boss encounter focusing specifically on the tasks the tank would need to accomplish. This structures game activity and also transmits the knowledge of how to handle the encounter to the other four players. And it fulfills the five criteria I've set for a meme. It has a clear beginning and end (from his asking if anyone needed to know how to fight the boss to his asking "got it?" at the end), it achieves his goal of teaching the other group members how to engage in the encounter (if it hasn't, in theory, the "got it?" while inelegant, should prompt anyone confused to ask for clarification), he replicates the encounter in a way by using the circle on the floor, the flares, and his own

character to mimic the movement of the battle, it is clearly replicable and transmittable as he is replicating a previous encounter, and upon his completion of sharing his meme he has invited the action of actually completing the boss encounter.

**What'd You Do?: Gathering Data, Observing, and Roflstomppwning Noobz**

I approached this study confident that if I watched, and listened, and questioned, insights into collaboration and identity formation would emerge. I didn't precisely know, at the onset, what precise paths I would follow once the data started to gel, but I knew what data I wanted. It was clear to me, having played enough to get to the point that I was prepared for my raid observations, that capturing the raid activity—through recordings of Ventrilo voice-over-internet-protocol (VoIP) and logging of in-game chat—and taking my own notes with screenshots, followed by semi-routine debriefings of my participants, would offer me a rich—though admittedly, partly incomplete—snapshot of each raid encounter.

The logic behind what I captured in the study may seem curious to an outsider, but those who have experienced the game might quickly recognize that I captured, as completely as possible, what was happening during the raid. In many ways chronicling a raid environment is like reporting on a sporting event or taking minutes at a meeting; the actual raid, the essence of what is happening, cannot be captured. There's no way to literally record the movements and thoughts of the ten raiders. But what one can keep a record of is what is said, what major actions are taken, and by grabbing screenshots (or taking video) the relative positions of people's toons and their movement. By recording the audio over Ventrilo, I captured 90% of the group's communication during the raid (and had a nice vehicle for asking other interview

questions). The chat log in-game captured the other 10% of that discussion. I utilized screenshots when needed, but video was very rarely possible due to the constraints of video recording something that high resolution over the network: recording creates lag. Lag, in a highly coordinated raid encounter where there are counters that run in tenths of seconds, is unacceptable. The fortunate side of the fact that I captured mostly discourse from the raid encounters is that the discourse—the words and directions exchanged, the examples provided—house the memes. So what I was hoping to capture was laid bare, along with the endless chatter that makes up a raid night.

I studied Flashpoint for a little over six months in total, four months intensely, which resulted in a phenomenal volume of logged chat and recordings—anywhere from three to five hours per night, three or four nights a week, for sixteen weeks plus misc. nights from later weeks. Such a volume of data presents interesting coding issues, of course. This is where my meme tool came in handy. Memes, as I described previously in this chapter, are not particularly uniform in size (e.g. two memes aren't necessarily of equal or even similar link or content), but due to their structure, they are relatively easy to isolate and pull out of the data. This allowed me to do a couple interesting things with the data: **1)** pull out memes to see how many happen in each encounter and **2)** compare the memes across multiple iterations of the same encounter.

In addition to isolating and observing memes, I split the chat data into five categorical types: **1)** raid/task specific (often directive or interrogative), **2)** purely social, **3)** both social and raid related—or misc. conversation, **4)** private communication and **5)** filler, for lack of a better word—discourse that appeared to not serve any purpose at all or which did something that was

outside the constraints of what I was looking for. This enabled me to look at how group dynamics and individual personalities co-mingled, coexisted, and at times worked against each other. It also allowed me to make reasonable sense of large chunks of data without becoming lost in the details. I have no doubt that this data could have been treated in a number of other ways, but these two methods of analysis were highly effective in unearthing several key findings from the data. At this point I'd like to briefly touch on another issue of paramount importance: the consideration of ethics in the research of gaming and game spaces.

**Ethics in Gaming Spaces: Five Key Considerations for MMO Research**

When undertaking a research study within an MMO, the first thing a researcher must grapple with is the issue of gaming research ethics. Ethics, of course, are something I would argue should come first for *all* researchers, but there are some tricky elements to ethical issues in digital space and yet more in gaming space that need to foreground any serious discussions. I offer here five key considerations which I have deduced from my research and my interactions with other scholars and researchers in rhetoric, in gaming studies, and in computers and writing.

***Consideration 1: MMOs are public spaces, but they aren't***. I've had this discussion with a number of other scholars in the field at the last several Computers & Writing conferences, and some of my thoughts on this informed the fantastic work of McKee (2008) and McKee and Porter (2009) relating to internet research, emerging from a panel and extended discussion we had over the topic at AoIR several years ago.

There was a prevailing belief—though it is scarcely documented while oft expressed—that digital spaces that can be accessed publically are "public" spaces. This seems, on the surface, to work as a parallel to real world observation, though when working with real world situations, there's a quick spiral from what is "legal" to what is "ethical." Legally, I can walk outside and just take photos or video of people and use it in my work, for those people happen to be walking in front of my apartment in the "public" space of our parking lot. Ethically, however, that would at least cause an eyebrow raise, particularly given how easily I could request a release. And while the law might not look unfavorably upon recording and photographing in public, each of the three universities I have done video and audio recording work for have had very clear, very specific directions involving release forms and avoiding accidental recording, things I personally take as serious considerations for research. Likewise, I would not in my research ethically document with names and specific faces/identifiable details things I have simply overheard while eavesdropping, walking across my college campus, though, again, I am out in public and can freely observe it. I could without legal repercussion, but I would also have to honestly admit that I could see the deceptive nature of the practice, and in that would admit to having compromised my ethics for the sake of a morsel of research.

A complexity that some have attempted to add to considerations of online space in relation to public and privacy is that if one needs a password, something is no longer public and hence should be protected. This might serve as the best hallmark in terms of "can observe publically," in a research sense, but it ignores three things that are important to consider: **A)** some places that call themselves publics are password protected (such as *Second Life*), **B)** places with password protection aren't always password protected (see *Facebook*, where privacy

issues allow for anyone with a direct url to access password protected content such as photographs) and **C)** such a division would be oddly artificial; while it might please institutional review boards and might function in some way as a legal buffer, a username and password don't function precisely like a gate on a community. One could just as easily equate things like admission to a university, or a Costco card, to be a username/password scenario, but the campuses of Universities (at least state schools) and the interiors of all Costcos are still considered public venues.

What I propose is that online spaces be treated in the *spirit* of the space. In that sense, Azeroth, in *WoW*, is public, in that it is meant to be a communal space and has previsions for an open "public" discourse and numerous private forms of discourse. However this public must be treated in careful ways: just as a careful researcher wouldn't simply click on a recorder in public, so too must a gamer be aware that things one might see in a gaming "public" might not be meant for public consumption, and gamers just like people passing on the street, might not expect to be recorded and put on display.

For the purposes of this study, I only attribute actions and quotes, by name, to the participants who signed consent forms and were a direct part of my study group. I have referred to events with those participants in larger groups by utilizing their descriptions and allowing my participants to describe any other actors (i.e. Iceman, a participant, referring to someone in a later chapter as TheBearTank). Any direct quotations in the study that are not from participants are either things said directly to me as a participant observer or are quotes that were repeated/related by my participants. I have avoided utilizing "public" quotes from

open game channels, as while these may appear public to some, those speaking would have no way of knowing I was monitoring them.

***Consideration Two: That Toon Sure Doesn't Look Like Who it Is.*** Very few *WoW* characters—or really any game characters of avatars in any MMO or MMO-like world (to include things like *Second Life*)— bear the player's real name. There are, of course, exceptions, for I have one toon named Phyll, though I did not utilize him in this study, and there is a rather "server famous" person—in that he is well known to the population on the server where I did my research—whose username is his first and last name smooshed together**,** but by and large toons have names like Lyon, Artemis, Throgarl, etc. In this sense, they are already pseudonym-like, but I would argue, as scholars like Lisa Nakamura (2010) have started to, that these names and identities are every bit as real in their effect as the names and identities of the people who play them. Due to this, I have given the toons in my study pseudonyms, too, though since I rarely interact with alts (meaning toons other than their usual, or "main" toon) from these participants and I rarely communicate with any of them outside of *WoW*, I generally refer to my participants in both toon and "person" form by a single pseudonym. This is because the identities I know—the "people," I guess I should say—are in-game toon identities. When I make reference to their lives outside of game space, I am sure to specify the shift, but I did not find it useful, or particularly necessary, to create separate pseudonyms for the players (divorcing them from their toons offers nothing in this particular study, though as a matter of ethics I can imagine scenarios where the toon and player would need to be clearly delineated. This just isn't such an occasion).

Matters of appearance are quite different in *WoW*. Names are unique, at least by server. If you're on the Hammerfall server, and you're "FredDurst17," no one else on Hammerfall can be FredDurst17. Someone on a server named Gladewater could be FredDurst17 if no one else has chosen that name, but if that toon ever changed servers to Hammerfall, the name would be force-changed by Blizzard's system. This means that at least in the world of the server where a toon lives and plays, no one else can have her name. I won't login as my alt Soriak and see another Soriak (though one day someone who was mad at Sorlak berated Soriak, which is a case of the "l" and the "i" in the Blizzard default UI font being so similar that the break between the stem of the "i" and the dot is easily misread as a solid line).

My toon Soriak, though, is a level 85 rogue. Gear—the armor a toon wears, the weapons he uses, etc.—is relatively standardized in *WoW*. As of the time of my final writing a system has been introduced to allow for cosmetic changes to gear—something I'd like to study in the future—but for the first seven years of *WoW*'s existence, and for the duration of my study period, there would be one item for each character item slot (meaning one helmet, one pair of gloves, one pair of boots, etc.) that were "Best in Slot" for a given toon; in other words, there was one item for every slot that every rogue wanted because it was the most valuable/useful item possible to obtain. Soriak is not my "main" toon, but he was at the end of my research period in his "best in slot pre-raid" gear. He is a goblin, which made him at the time part of the most populous in-game race. This would mean that I would quite typically login and see numerous rogues in identical gear, looking almost exactly like Soriak. The same is true for each class. Due to this, images of in-game toons are far less unique, and if names are removed do not really represent something that is particularly individual. I could, for example, use the

reference tool “WorldofLogs” (at www.worldoflogs.com) to find the 50 best rogues in the world, regardless of server, then go to the *WoW* armory (at armory.worldofwarcraft.com) and pull up their profiles. Those 50 images would look surprisingly similar, with some differences in racial choice and some small variations in gear. But most of them would be goblins or humans (depending on choice between horde and alliance) and would have a number of similar pieces of gear. Some would be identical.

I specify this because it is important for those studying gaming to realize that the standards we use for identity protection with “real life” participants are at once very similar to and surprisingly different from the reality that gamers face. I use game screenshots in this research sparingly, but presentation of images, because toons are built from finite visual options, is far less of an identity imposition than representation of names. If I turn off the nameplates in game—which removes character names from view—I have a difficult time locating Iceman, even though I’ve spent hours on end with him. A stranger with a photo of him wandering Azeroth without a name would be hopeless to track him down. But if I used his real toon name, in a matter of seconds anyone who could login to the server or access worldofwarcraft.com could locate him and invade his privacy. As researchers, we have to be constantly aware of what information about our participants is the most at risk, what is the most precious.

**Consideration Three: It's Creepy to Watch.** I can actually take this a step deeper in terms of my research: it would be impossible to watch a raid group. There is no spectator mode[10]. To observe the raid I would have had to have found a raider and watched over her shoulder, listening in as an extra voice with no stake in the game. This wouldn't be true of every game, and it likely won't be true of MMOs in the future, as games become more inclusive and as the seemingly fringe world of professional gaming takes root. Someday I believe people will watch raids in a similar way to how we watch sports, though I do not anticipate the number of viewers.

Assuming one could just watch, however, there's a much bigger hurdle. It's creepy. And that's not my assertion: that's what all of my participants said (some in different words—one said "perverted"), and that is the attitude I observed in an earlier study (Alexander, 2009). Due to the volume of academic research that paints them in a negative light, particularly the emergence of a blanket bombing of the internet gaming community by undergraduate students in sociology and psychology classes, [11] gamers are more paranoid than most toward research

[10] At the very end of my dissertation drafting—in April of 2012—the practice of streaming raid video has started to become semi-popular as gamers have strong enough machines and enough internet bandwidth to do so without creating lag. I am personally unsure I would consider watching a raid stream to be anywhere near a valuable research practice, but it is something I will be sure to consider in the future and wanted to recognize here for those who might read this much later and wonder why I didn't consider using streams for this project.

[11] These are not the sorts of studies that are published; they are most typically, it seems, from sociology classes and involve students, to use the words of the forum posters "invading" their space to ask leading questions and surveys that don't provide the respondents much agency. They tend to pop up and vanish too quickly to be chronicled, but I have been able to locate a new one at least once a week on the forums at http://www.worldofwarcraft.com and http://www.wowhead.com . A fantastic example of something more widespread, while still

by outsiders (something I discovered during my coursework leading to this project) and are quick to move to verbal violence and to erect walls to keep outsiders from poking into the gaming world. Due to this, it would be highly unlikely that anyone could do worthwhile, robust research in an MMO by simply peering in or observing gamers from a distance. To borrow in-game vernacular, "don't hate, participate." Gamers don't want to be written about by people with white coats and clipboards who would put them behind glass, and the results of research done in this way—by scattershot survey, by use of targeted questions without observation—reflect a lack of understanding (and often, if read closely, reveal the gamer's clever attempt to embarrass the researcher).

**Consideration Four: You Better Be Good!** In her work, Bonnie Nardi (2010) has echoed the sentiment I've put forth since the beginning of my own gaming studies work nearly a decade ago: if you're going to talk about a game, you better know how to play it. This philosophy came to me through the evolution of a concept first taught to me by my original teaching mentor (and the teacher of my first college composition class) Dr. Laverne Nishihara at Indiana University. When I came to her once frustrated with my progress on a writing project, she calmly talked me through some initial brainstorming and then said something that resonated deeply with my own ethical stance toward life in general: "write what you know." It's a cliché, I know, but it's of tremendous value.

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academic, that is easily observable would be the documentary film *Second Skin* (2009), which takes a decidedly negative tone toward gamers and is generally decried by the community as being inaccurate without apology.

I carried that cliché with me, using it to shape my work, but the reality for any of us in the academy is that unless we came to the field as supremely diverse artisans with a lifetime of experiences, there's not a career in writing what we know. That's where a little inversion helps: my mantra, when teaching my students, is "if you're going to write about it, you better know what it is and how to do it." This has led me to send students out to skateboard (she wanted to write about skater culture), to participate in habitat for humanity (he wanted to write about charity work and do some light field research), and it's led me, personally, to do everything from learning how to sew to working for a night as police officer.

When doing research, though, I would push Nardi to join me a bit further down the path still. It's not enough to know how to play the game. Anyone doing research similar to the work I have done here needs to be good at the game. And when I say that, I'm not at all saying that a person needs to have any sort of innate gaming skill (one might argue that I do, since I've been gaming my entire life, but I don't think that's a matter of importance in this case). What I am saying is that one must put in time and effort. To do this research project, I had to "level" a number of toons (meaning play from level 1 to level 85, which takes anywhere from 7-21 days of game time depending on how quickly the player executes things). I had to learn to play my particular classes and roles well. I had to be ready to raid, ready to take directions and execute. I couldn't be the one guy who "sucked" out of the ten members of the group; I had to be ready to carry my weight.

There are three reasons for this. **A)** On a strictly ethical level, as a researcher, you'd be, like myself, taking up one of a limited number of spaces on a raid team. You owe it to them to

be at least as good as their weakest link, otherwise you're asking them to do worse-than-their-usual just so you can study them, and you'd be, as Iceman laughingly said he'd never let me "screwing up your research by sucking hardcore." **B)** The second reason is because reciprocity matters, and in reality all a gaming researcher can give back without being coercive is a rock solid contribution to the raid and to the raid group's supplies. Being a good raider is what you—the researcher—give to your participants as a thank you for their willingness to let you study their work. And, of course, **C)** if you're bad, they're not going to invite you back, so you'll never finish the work you're starting. Bad players get kicked out of raid groups all the time. Being a researcher wouldn't exclude one from that fate. So if you want to research *WoW*, you better know what it means when the raid leader calls for you to "execute burn." You better be ready to "pre-pot."

**Consideration Five: These People Are Here to Have Fun.** While this isn't unique to the study of games, the fun factor is something that is relatively outside of the research norm in composition and rhetoric and technical communication. Our usual venues of consideration—particularly for the sort of identity and teamwork based research I'm doing here—are either academic or work related, where the primary goal is the production of something, the learning of something, or the completion of a very specific task. Herein lies the enigma of gaming; that is also true in game space. The raiders I researched with were very much interested in completing very specific tasks, and when that wasn't possible, they were quite disappointed and redoubled their efforts to do it better. At the same time, however, their choice to do this wasn't motivated by a grade, to learn a specific skill to advance their career, or to make a paycheck. Their primary reason to do it was because it was *fun*.

I mention that here because the fun factor is something I find myself in an interesting dance with during all of my research and particularly with this raid group. There are moments when the research has to sort of slow, or I had to sit on questions, because my being a researcher and needing to "nerd out" (as Salty referred to it) could have had a negative impact on the group's ability to have fun. Likewise there were times, particularly when dealing with the issues of group identity that I explore in chapter 5, where for the good of the group I often worked not specifically against, but away, from gathering additional data because there were moments of intense angst which I by my own ethical code didn't stir up, even if in the moment I felt the inclination, and the researcher's curiosity, to poke with a stick. There were also, on rare occasions, moments where I was given the answer "because it's fun" when I might have personally theorized there was more motivating an action, and I have tried as someone who understands the gaming mindset to treat both the assertion of "I did it for fun" and my own intuition that there was something else happening co-exist without one overpowering the other.

**And So I Boldly Go Where… Wait, Wrong Fantasy Universe: The Study Begins**

I've had this moment of discussion with people before about my research, and it results sometimes in an odd eyebrow raise, but I went into this project, much like the project before it, with a number of ideas, and with a framework with which to look, but I didn't have any preconception of what precisely I'd find. I was tempted to likewise author the results of the study without revealing what I'd found until each thing was laid bare, but I also recognized in considering such a method that I might do my reader a disservice by not providing a roadmap.

So I offer here the five key points that will emerge more fully, and will be more completely explained, in the four chapters that follow. Disconnected from their contextual tissue they may seem abrupt, but I ask that you bear with me and allow them to serve as seeds that will grow throughout the rest of the text. These were not research questions, nor where they research directives. These are five things that spending time with and observing the raid group revealed to me, five issues that insisted upon themselves.

**What Emerged: 5 Things This Study Has To Share**

***Collaborative Learning, Collaborative Literacy.*** Over my months of raiding and observing Flashpoint, a number of intriguing threads emerged from my analysis of the raid encounters and the group's dynamics. One of the most interesting things I noticed were moments that felt almost like quantum leaps in player learning, where the guild would go from failing in a way that seemed hopeless to executing something that, after checking their successes against the large body of guild data online, few could manage. And through watching the guild wrestle with various challenges, handling the miscues and turning what seemed completely overwhelming into smaller, manageable practices, the study shows that in at least this case **gamers have a sophisticated sense of collaboration and serve as moment-to-moment literacy sponsors for each other in game scenarios**.

I was also struck by what a difference the multi-player aspect makes in terms of understanding gaming as a practice in and of itself. Much of the scholarship that exists on video games at this point looks either at single player scenarios, where it is "me" vs. "the machine," or at direct player-vs.-player scenarios where one player (or a small group) takes on another

player (or small group). When considering a raiding group, the dynamic is ten independent thinkers vs. the seemingly unerring machine. The computer opponent, with its sophisticated AI but ultimately the slave of rule sets and number systems, knows what it plans to do, what it will do, when it will do it (more or less), and in any given day it grinds through numerous raiders like a lawnmower over spring grass, chewing them up and then spitting them back out. The raid group, meanwhile, will need for all ten members to make the right moves and right choices; this is not strictly true when content gets old and raiders out-gear the encounters (meaning they have gear from several raids later and are "overpowered" vs. the content), as in that sort of scenario one or two lackluster of confused raiders can be carried, but in progression raiding like what Flashpoint engaged in, one weak link means everyone's dead.

There's a spirit here that is important not just to gaming, though, but to our very understanding of collaborative learning. While we have all, no doubt, seen it stressed that writing is a process, it is relatively rare in my experience to see a direct recognition of and reflection upon failure in our field. The one exception I can think of to that has widespread footing in computers and writing is the Danielle DeVoss, Ellen Cushman and Jeff Grabill (2005) piece ""Infrastructure and Composing: The When of Infrastructure and Composing: The When of New-Media Writing," which speaks to the problems infrastructure causes for digital writing (a topic that is far too often left to the wayside).

If computers and writing were to look at digital composing and collaboration like a gamer—and I must say, to this point gaming studies hasn't done nearly as much of this as it should—there would be numerous instances where the discussion would include failure. Of

course in the field we don't fail in the same way; I sincerely hope that none of us are dying and left in ghost form hunting down our corpses so we can leap back into them, heal up and try again. But the very spirit of MMO gaming is the group form of the "probing" that James Gee (2007) discusses in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*; or to greatly simplify his idea while retaining the spirit of it, the mantra that Flashpoint spouts on every new encounter, due in no small part to my pointing it out: try and die, try and die.

For example, the Flashpoint raid group died 27 times learning the first movement of an encounter during the first week of my research. 27 times all ten people went in, attempted the encounter, died, came back, set up again, tried again. Over an hour of just dying before the first few minutes of the encounter were done. 27 failures for one successful move not beyond the encounter but just on to the next portion of the encounter. Here's the important aspect of it, though. 27 failed attempts at that first stage of the encounter, looking specifically for one way to do only one part of it in a way that would work for the group. No one was distraught by these 27 attempts. No one thought even once of giving up, nor did anyone in the group feel as if we were "failing" or were "bad" at what we were doing. We were doing what one does when one learns a raid encounter. We were watching, trying, thinking, talking, collaborating, learning, then teaching. And because of that, I am comfortable asserting that **teachers and students—I am thinking specifically here of computers and writing in the academy, but I think this applies spread wide to all teachers and all learners—can learn a great deal about the value of trying and failing without taking on some sort of emotional burden from watching gamers. Gamers have the balance of "fail to succeed" right in that one successful encounter is worth however many failures it takes**.

***How Gaming Compliments and Complicates Digital Identity.*** I still lament that for all my desire to look at issues of race as related to identity, this particular study didn't allow for that. I am confident, however, that the tools I've developed here will allow me to do that sort of work in the not-too-distant future with another sample. Short of that one small regret, however, what I learned here about digital identity fascinates me.

Scholars in the field have said time and time again—from Turkle to Nakamura and back again—that in online environments users "play" with identity, trying out things they might not ever try, or might not be so quick to embrace fully, in real life (IRL). That held true, to a degree, with my participants. For example Iceman pointed out that he hardly ever swears in his day-to-day life (as did another member of the group who is deeply Christian from a devout family, someone who never dares in his regular life to engage on the sort of *South Park*-meets-a-locker-room debauchery that is present in a *WoW* raid). And of course there is the more obvious element with a gaming identity in that most choose to view themselves—as Blizzard itself claims over and over is the hope—as heroes in *WoW*. I will use myself here so as to avoid potentially insulting any of my participants, but I am in reality an overweight academic who spends far too much time at his desk or located elsewhere sedentary, reading or writing. It's the nature of who and what I am. I don't say that to reflect in a negative light on the career path I've chosen; I love that I spend so much of my time reading and writing. But the odds of me packing food, a few magic talismans, and a spare suit of armor into a backpack, grabbing a pair of enchanted axes, and flying on a purple bird across the countryside in search of adventure are so slim that I am more likely to when the lottery without a ticket. I am not in my real life, nor will I ever be, my toon.

At the same time, as much as I am myself idealistically fond of the idea that one can go online and be free from the trappings of real life, and as much as I believe Nakamura's metaphor of the "identity tourist" functions well, my research indicates that maybe it's not as much like being a tourist or removing ourselves from the equation as we might have thought. In watching my participants practice and enact their identities in the gaming world, it is abundantly clear that they are extending into the game space and cultivating identities that are at once who they are IRL and something they cannot possibly be IRL. In other words, **when computers and writing scholars talk about digital identity, we need to be careful not to simplify to the point that we lose the texture of the intricate, deliberate, and highly rhetorical interactions between real life identities and online constructs**.

I also discovered something that while I am certain the internet researchers have thought about in some ways—scholars of social media in particular, or those who have researched communities like Napster—there isn't a great deal of writing about: digital group identities. In a sense I wonder how I could have missed hypothesizing that they existed from the outset of my research, as it now makes perfect sense to me that a raid group not only can or should but *must* have a group identity to function at the sort of high level that progression raiding requires. I document here, in chapters 4 and 5, problems that arise when that sense of group identity is frayed around the edges. In that sense, **it would serve internet researchers—in computers and writing, in gaming studies, in digital media studies—well to consider that digital identity is as much a group phenomenon as it is an individual one**.

***A Copy of a Copy of a Copy: The Meme in Gaming.*** The last thing that emerged from this study is really a return to the first, the underlying structure that allowed me to do the research in the first place. Beyond the narratology vs. ludology debate in gaming studies, beyond understandings of practice and mechanism, of rule sets and probing, the understanding that gaming is built upon replication, and that those replicated actions are memes, making the very practice of gaming and learning to play memetic makes gaming easier to approach for study. **Gaming studies will benefit greatly from the utility offered by a memetics framework**, but more importantly **considerations of learning spread wide across a variety of environments could benefit from being viewed through the lens of the meme.**

**Overview of Chapters**

The following chapters of this dissertation explore these emergent themes and utilize specific examples from my research to illustrate what, precisely, led me to make such assertions and beyond that what the assertions have to show to other scholars, to gamers, to curious readers. At times it may feel as if the following chapters are heavily narrative; this is intentional, and while I realize that this decision may strike some readers as odd, or perhaps it may seem like I have taken a longer path than the reader might have anticipated to reach a point, it is important to see how these raid related discussions emerge from specific contexts, and those contexts, due to the nature of communication in-game, end up being highly narrative and story-like. As a researcher confined as I am by the genre of the dissertation—stuck speaking to you mostly with alphabetic textual words with some illustrations—I cannot, as much as I would like, take you as a reader into the game world and point to things, take you out for a

raid, let you get your feet wet and your weapons dirty. We cannot inhabit, together, Blackwing's Descent. I cannot offer you a seat on the back of my dragon and fly you to Sulfurion Spire in the Firelands so that you can gaze down onto Beth'talac's web. I can only describe what I observed, tell you what people did, where people were, how it all went down. At times, it might feel like I'm "just telling you a story about what happened," but in reality this is a methodological decision that I did not make lightly; the only way I can truly do justice to what I saw is to, simply, share stories of what happened within my data. To strip away too much of the ambient activity trivializes what is in reality complex action. In other words I am asking you to trust me when I tell you that in order to see the richness of what is happening, you need to know these stories. Without them, my assertions face the risk of sounding hollow.

And with that, I embark on chapter 3 and a deeper reflection on gaming literacy and what it means to learn to play *World of Warcraft*. I start by turning, as I just suggested I often do, to a story from my research.

## Chapter 3: Dances with Digital Worms or Welcome to the Era of Memetic Gaming, Just Like the Last Era, Just Like the Next Era, Just Like This Era

*I am standing in front of a massive wind god named Al'Akir. He has just used his power to blow me backward on the platform which holds me and my fellow combatants, and as I rush to return to my spot close enough to unleash melee attacks on the god, our raid leader calls out to me over Ventrilo.*

*"Phill, there's a line of tornados coming at you. Move fast!"*

*"I see them… kind of," I say, as I spin to face the squall line. And then I'm picked up by one of the twisters, thrown from the platform, and float out into the sky, dying, still staring back up at the hulking wind god.*

*"What the fuck? I told you the tornado was coming!" Iceman says, nicely in spite of how it reads in text.*

*"I know, I know. I just couldn't get turned in time. Once I saw them, it was too late."*

*"Shit, did you keyboard turn?"*

*"You mean with my arrow keys? Yeah."*

*"You have to mouse turn there. Keyboard is too slow."*

*Iceman curses about something else, and over Ventrilo I can hear his keystrokes like the hooves of a charging horse.*

*"No problem. I'll show you before the next pull."*

*Eventually the group wiped, Iceman gave me a thirty second tutorial on turning with my mouse, and never again—well, not never again, but far, far less often, did the squall line make short work of me.*

*And so I learned.*

In the previous chapter, I established that I am looking at gaming literacy acquisition as well as gaming collaboration via a lens that foregrounds and uses as its focal element "the meme." While I offered examples along with the methodology, this chapter will dissect a single moment of data collection, using other moments of data collection to reinforce key points, to exhibit how the idea of memetics and the meme are directly related to gaming literacy and how, in this specific encounter, having the right game literacies makes successful collaboration as easy as listening and reacting.

I wish to open here with an assertion: gamers have a sophisticated collaborative method of learning and literacy sponsorship which they enact nearly constantly while playing. This sponsorship is rooted in the very same things in which gamers root their own learning: memes and feedback loops. What is particularly interesting, however—as the data here will exhibit as I move through a rather complex example—is how the combination of understanding and enacting these memes and observing these feedback loops leads to moments of innovative agency by individual gamers which result not only in group success but ultimately in further educating—and further enhancing—the group's combined skills and abilities.

Before moving directly to data from my research, however, allow me to flesh out some of the key terms in play here: learning, literacy, the "feedback loop" and it relationship to memetics. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the meme and the concept of memetics offers a powerful backdrop for the consideration of gaming activity. In this chapter I will further illustrate how collaborative learning—and moments of teaching, or literacy sponsorship—hinge on the same memetic dynamics. This all builds toward the establishment of a set of knowledge

types that are at play in the gaming world, building onto work that finds its root in Aristotle and follows a line to contemporary professional writing and thinkers like Robert Johnson (1998, 2010). The important point to remember, from the onset, is that unlike many things educators and researchers might observe when speaking of learning and literacy, an MMO is a space that is truly by-necessity social. Unlike groups where a few members might do most of the work, a *WoW* raid requires that ten people do roughly equal amounts of work, and unlike scenarios where a contrary, weak, or counterproductive member of the group can be marginalized, a *WoW* raid depends on the input of ten. There are moments in this discussion that are in part about individual decisions and individual reactions, but these must always be understood in the context of happening in a simultaneous collaboration with nine other people.

**Social Learning, Feedback Loops, and How to Look at Learning in Games**

Though it comes from outside of rhetoric, gaming studies and technical/professional writing, the most useful theory for considering in-game learning comes from the work of psychologist Albert Bandura. In his landmark 1976 work *Social Learning Theory*, Bandura made the following three key assertions about how human beings learn:

1) People learn through observing others (e.g. the famous "bobo" doll experiments, wherein children who watched adults interact violently with a doll later replicated that activity when asked to play with the doll)
2) Pride, satisfaction and sense of accomplishment are as important to learning as external rewards, making learning a social cognitive process that happens in the brain of the

individual due to individual thoughts and feelings shaped by external factors and the individual's view of interactions with others, particularly while learning new skills.

3) But learning doesn't necessarily lead to a change in behavior. Bandura instead asserted—and follow-up studies have confirmed—that people may very well learn from the modeling of others and have a change in their thinking without actually changing their behavior.

Also important from Bandura's work is his theory of the modeling process, which is eerily similar to a memetic process. Modeling requires four things, according to Bandura: *attention* (in other words, the "learner" must be paying attention and concentrating), *retention* (the person who is "learning" must have the capacity to somehow store the information, be that directly in memory, writing it down, or some other method), *reproduction* (the ability to perform what was observed—this is identical to this step in memetic theory), and *motivation* (the learner has to want to learn and want to replicate the behavior). With these four key elements, modeling a behavior can successfully, according to Bandura and those who follow his theories, teach another, and hence a person can learn through watching and copying.

In Bandura's work is an answer to the question I posed earlier. If faith is placed in Bandura's assertion that a person being able to replicate after having watched is indeed learning, then I can assert without reservation that the participants in my study learned. In fact, as Salty said after I suggested this, "*well, yeah. We could pull this 100 times and still be learning, if we watch and find little new things to try*." And as if he was simply determined to prove the point, hours later, during the same play/interview session, we saw a pick-up-group member do

something no one in our group had tried before with great success, utilizing a goblin character racial ability called “goblin jump”—which propels the in-game toon approximately 20 feet in a straight line—to leap a chasm inside the Blackwing Descent dungeon that everyone in our group had walked the rather long thirty second route around before. Salty and I spent the next twenty minutes replicating the jump, mastering the timing, and marveling at having learned something new about a dungeon we’d spent the better part of five hours a week in for several months.

Bandura’s research has enjoyed a recent resurgence due to the proliferation of affordable data collection devices and the proliferation of feedback loops. A feedback loop consists of four stages: 1) evidence of an activity or the need for a different activity (a grabber of *attention*), 2) a revelation of the relevance of that information (*motivation*), 3) a reminder of consequences should an action not be taken (a *motivation* and the usual reason for *retention* of an idea) and finally 4) an action (the *reproduction*).

An easy-to-follow example of a feedback loop based in daily practice was the highlight of a July 2011 *Wired* article by Thomas Goetz: the use of “your current speed” radar signs in a school zone. Goetz (2011) tells the story of a Garden Grove, California school zone with a serious speeding problem. Police officers establishing speed traps and writing numerous tickets had no real impact on the speed of drivers, but the placement of a sign, including simply the words “your speed” and a radar readout giving the passing car’s speed, led to a drivers reducing their speed in the zone by an average of 14 percent (p. 128). Following Bandura’s theory, the reason for people slowing down is that the sign, by prompting with the legally posted speed and the driver’s speed, offers a static model (the speed limit) and evidence of the driver’s actual

speed, then leverages the motivation of the driver to obey the law and "do the right thing." This behavior is then learned and repeated even when the radar portion of the sign is later removed.

I wish to complicate this idea of the feedback loop just a bit more, however, as the scenario of a driver following the speed limit strikes parallels with a player in a gaming scenario. The first important thing which the simple explanation of the feedback loop ignores is that there are differing primary concerns for the legal officials placing the sign (the sign, as an artifact, carries their agency) and the driver: those who enforce the speed limit wish for drivers who travel on that street to move at or below the speed limit, though these people do not, in particular, care if people actually drive on the street. Similarly, the goal of the driver is to pass the school zone and go on with her driving tasks; while she is unlikely to specifically desire to break a law, the regulation of her rate of movement is generally not of her primary concern, as her goal is to get from point A to point B (and most likely to do so as quickly as possible, though I would hesitate to make that a universal assumption, as some may enjoy driving slowly or have no particular concern with their driving time). There is, then, a window in which a number of "correct" methods can be used for the rules of the scenario (the speed limit) and the desires of the driver (to move forward) can occur. To move too fast could mean failure (if a police officer is present to write a ticket) or could lead to a number of unexpected negative consequences (such as striking a pedestrian). To stop entirely would mean the inability to achieve the goal of passing through the zone. A driver might, however, choose an alternate route instead. This might seem to circumvent the speed limit, but it in fact does not, as the goal of those imposing

the speed limit is still met; if a driver changes routes to avoid a specific speed zone, that driver is still not exceeding the speed within that zone.

On the surface, adding those complexities might seem unnecessary, but what viewing the speed limit radar sign feedback loop scenario in such a nuanced way allows for is a direct correlation to a gaming moment. A game is, as I detailed in previous chapters, a set of rules and goals placed in front of a player or players for navigation. And a gamer, like the driver in that scenario, must find a solution that allows for adherence to the rules of the game but also allows for her to achieve the goal, otherwise the gamer "epic fails." I will return to a specific iteration of this feedback loop in a moment, but before proceeding further, I will first detail an entire raid encounter so that I can apply these ideas to a concrete, recorded piece of data from my research.

**Flashpoint, Instant Success, and Gaming Literacies**

Flashpoint, a "casual" raiding guild, conducted its first run into the *World of Warcraft Cataclysm* raid content during the last week of February in 2011. The guild is actually "just" a 10 person raiding group "with some bench players and a few social friends who don't raid," according their founder, Lint. Flashpoint came together when Lint and his friend Iceman were confronted with what the two considered "serious" social/interpersonal problems with their previous guild, TheSkullz. The dispute between the members of that guild, which led to the split that created Flashpoint and eventually led to TheSkullz almost folding, is something I will address in deeper detail in Chapter 4.

The first encounter in the Cataclysm raid progression—in other words the starting point to the 12 boss set of encounters— is a boss called Magmaw in the dungeon Blackwing Descent. This would be Flashpoint's, well, flashpoint. The Magmaw encounter is a perfect example of how memetics and collaboration—and some slight innovation—make for group success. The encounter, at its essence, is simple—a memetic concert of four coordinated movements (with each player executing specific tasks) that repeats until the boss or the raid group is dead. The raid group, ten members—three healers, one tank, and six DPS—must kill a gigantic lava worm named Magmaw while avoiding his attacks, spews of lava, and small groups of lava parasites that emerge from the spew. And so from the standpoint of a gaming story, the heroes charge in, engage the giant worm, and as Iceman says each week, "pew-pew, don't stand in shit, get loot, then kill the next thing."

But as scholars like Jesper Juul (2005) have pointed out numerous times, gaming situations are almost never "just" about a story. The Magmaw encounter, then, is a situation where there are players and a goal, there are rules, but most importantly, there are mechanics—the actions of the game—and practices – actions by toons—that must be understood, enacted, and replicated numerous times to have success. In other words, as I suggested in my introduction, the encounter is a memetic chain, and success of failure is primarily based on the ability of the gamers to do three things: 1) to understand and recognize the memetic nature of the mechanics, 2) to execute the practices required for their specific role, and 3) to recognize what the other nine players are doing and react when someone—or more than one someone—botches the meme.

Allow me to set the stage for the Magmaw encounter so that I can better explain these memetic elements. Magmaw stands along one of the long edges of a rectangular room that is empty other than two broken pillars near the back and an advantageously placed stone spike that just happens to be directly in front of the worm. The area where Magmaw actually stands is a hole broken away from the floor and a side wall, and well below the worm's head (I've never tried to measure, as it would require falling to my virtual death), about 80 in-game feet below, is a lava pit. The players enter the area via one of two parallel staircases to the south, and while entering the room, from the dungeon's door at the base of the steps, they must battle three "trash mobs," or, to put that in less gamecentric terms, three less powerful enemies that are, as is reflected in what gamers call them, more of an annoyance and chance for random loot drops than any real challenge. Once those mobs are defeated, the group can engage Magmaw. Below see figure 4: a screenshot of Magmaw's chamber before the battle begins and figure 5, a screenshot of the group mid-encounter.

The encounter follows a series of relatively simple memetic steps that must be strung together correctly by each member of the group in order for the encounter to work correctly. This is true any time a group encounters Magmaw. It is a bedrock meme for the fight, an encounter that has no random elements (something Iceman points out frequently to the raid group—"we control everything here"). There are, essentially, five roles: 1) the tank (this is one of the few single tank fights in the first tier of 10 person *Cataclysm* content), 2) melee DPS who must attack the worm and utilize the spike, 3) ranged DPS who must attack the worm and kill the lava parasite "adds" 4) the raid healers, who must insure that everyone but the tank stays alive, and 5) the tank healer, who must keep the tank from dying.

Figure 4: Magmaw and his chamber

In Flashpoint's raids, Lint is the tank for this encounter 90% of the time, including the first night, the specific instance I am describing here. His role is, as he says "the easiest to fuck up," but requires, as he is again quick to admit "less moving and stuff" than many others. When the raid group was ready to begin the encounter, Lint issued a countdown from three over Ventrilo, then he attacked Magmaw, insuring that he stood just to the left of the boss as close as he could stand without falling into the lava. His only goal was to insure that no matter what anyone did, the worm's attention (in game referred to as "aggro" short for aggravation) stayed firmly on him (and to not die, something Lint would remind me is "job number one"), as he cycled through his abilities utilizing whatever he could to insure that his damage intake isn't so high that his healer could not keep up. After two minutes and nine seconds, Magmaw leaned down and bit Lint, then reared up again with Lint in his mouth, mangling him. During this time,

Lint took severe damage and could do nothing but count on his healer and make slowed, weakened attacks to the nose of the beast. After the worm was pulled onto the spike (see next paragraph) Lint was released, and he then rotated to the right side, waited for the worm rear back up, and began his memetic actions again, though after the first, the bites come every minute. The night of that first run, he was taken up a total of five times. You can see Lint's positioning, as well as everyone else's, in Figure 6 below.


Figure 5: Raid group engaged with Magmaw (text in image not relevant)

During the encounter, two members of the DPS group—in this case me and a non-study-participant who also plays a Death Knight—stood in melee range, attacked the worm, and at an appointed time enacted a specific and critical task. As I mentioned above, there is a spike just in front of Magmaw. These two DPS stand in position near the spike, attacking the boss and avoiding attacks whenever possible. When Magmaw bites the tank and lifts him into the air, the

worm slumps forward. At this point, the spike is clickable, and if the two melee DPS click, they can leap onto the spike and from the spike onto Magmaw's head where, conveniently, there are spears with chains from previous battles. Once on the head, the two DPS can throw the chains down onto the spike, using them to pull and slam Magmaw's head into the ground, impaling the worm on the spike for a short time. This causes Magmaw to drop the tank, and for 30 seconds Magmaw is stunned and receives double damage. During this phase of the encounter, the melee DPS drop off of Magmaw's head and begin attacking again, rotating then to stand by the spike on the side opposite the tank when Magmaw rears up again. This is repeated as many times as the tank is bitten. On this particular night, myself and the other Death Knight repeated the jump/spear toss portion of the battle five times, each coming just after Lint was bitten and lifted up.

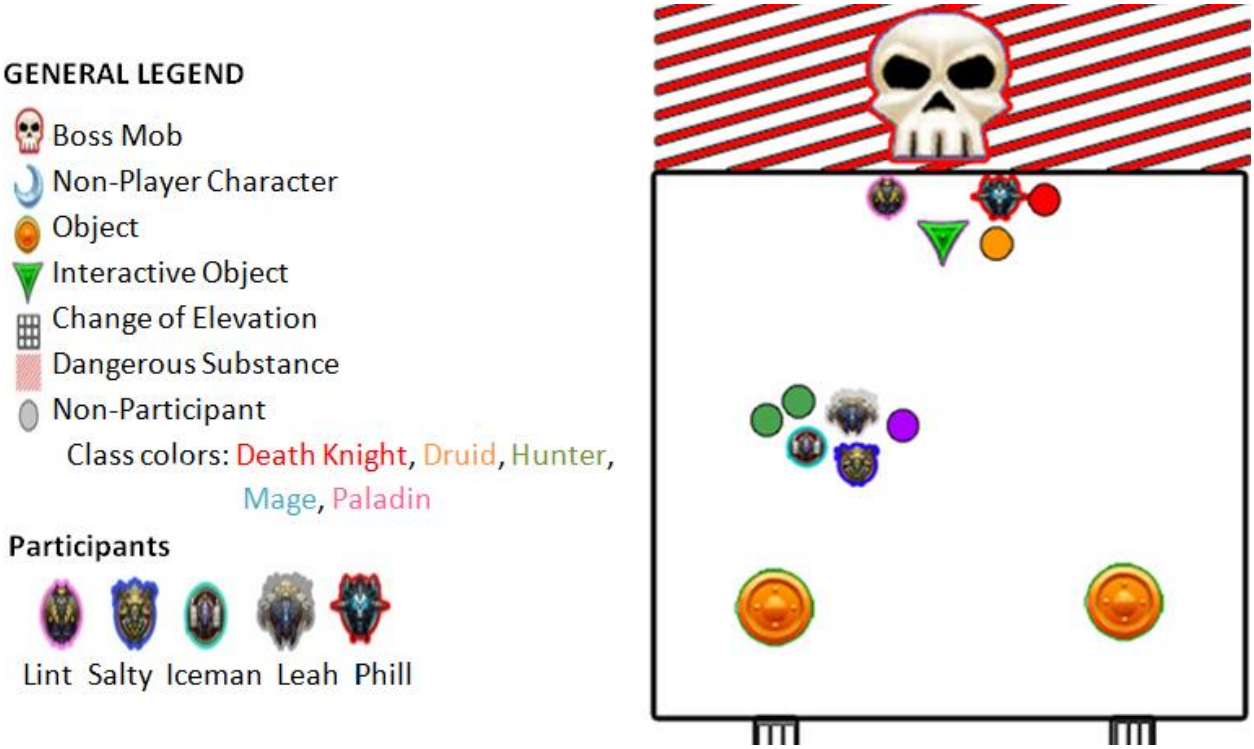


Figure 6: Initial Magmaw Positioning

The ranged DPS, who can attack from a distance, cluster with two of the healers off to the side behind the tank at the start of the fight. That particular night, as with every run, Flashpoint chose to group up to the left first, but this could easily be reversed, as long as the practice of moving from one side to the other is replicated, as the location of the lava pillar is dictated by the position of the players. Of my participants, healers Leah and Salty were part of this group on the night of the first Flashpoint raid, along with Iceman, who DPSed as a mage and also raid led, a pair of hunters, and a warlock. Their job was to attack Magmaw and move out of the way of lava spews, going from left to right, then right to left, then left to right, etc. as Magmaw casted an ability called "lava pillar," an attack that is aimed at one specific ranged player—one of the people in that group—and insures that if they move in unison just after the cast, everyone is safe from the attack. The ranged DPS then attacked the lava parasites, the little worm adds I mentioned earlier, which emerged from the impact point of the lava pillar. Once those parasites were dead, the DPS returned to attacking Magmaw until it was time to repeat their movement. These often overlapped with the tank and melee DPS moving (four of the five times), but they also happen more often (an additional eight times in the encounter, for a total of twelve moves right and then back left), so the ranged DPS and healers were often moving from left to right to left to right throughout the encounter, avoiding lava and killing parasites, or in the case of the healers, healing.

The last role in the fight is that of the tank healer, who in this encounter was a druid. His job was to keep Lint—and himself— alive, rotating positions with the melee DPS to avoid attacks. His role required little physical movement but was, as Salty told me from times when

he had to do it “extremely intense” because of the profound amount of damage Lint took while inside Magmaw’s jaw.

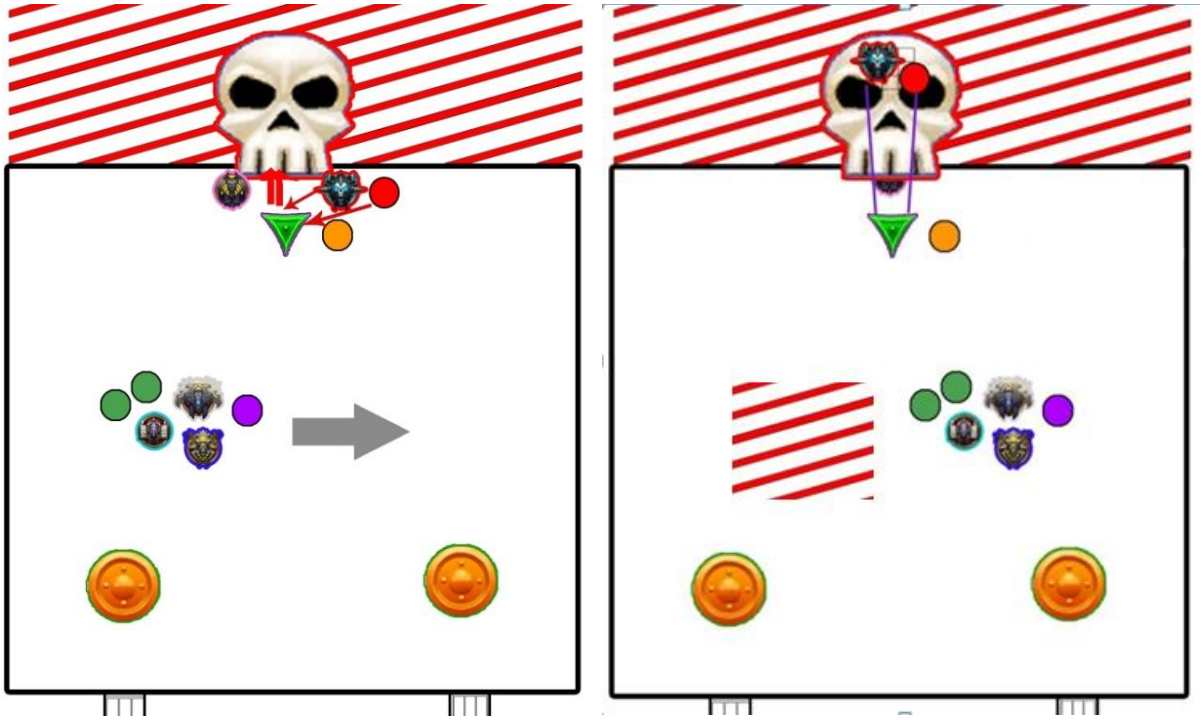

Figure 7: Magmaw encounter movements

Those are the roles, practices and memetic mechanics of the Magmaw encounter. I have explained them as I observed them happening that first night, trying to balance description with clarity and to stay true to the game without going jargon crazy. But this is how Iceman explains it each week, so memetically that I can almost lip-sync him (as this is the start of each raid, I heard him say this every Tuesday at about midnight for four months):

> Okay, Lint, you know what you’re doing. Don’t lose aggro. Don’t fall in the lava. Don’t die. If you’re melee DPS, you want to stand by the spike away from Lint. Don’t stand in the fire crap that comes up, though, and when Magmaw comes down, spam click on the spike until you go up, then spam one until you get a

> target, click, and be ready to start pew-pewing when you land. Tank healer, stand up by Phill, and if you see your threat go up, have him DnD on you. DPS, I've put the square on my head. Follow me. We have to dodge the lava pillar. If you get hit, you fail the retard test and we all die. Once the parasites spawn, AOE them hard until they're dead, then get back on the boss. WATCH YOUR FEET! Don't stand in the lava. It'll kill you. Healers, stay with us. Don't trail behind or the lava pillar will hit you and we all die. Any questions?

This is, of course, game jargon dense, and Iceman says it so often that it comes out in what seems like a single rapid-fire rap verse, no stops to breathe, no pauses to think. There is also an assumption that isn't written into what Iceman said here, in what he says every week: it is assumed that anyone who is in the raid group with Flashpoint has either seen this encounter at least once before or has watched one of the several YouTube tutorial videos and read the description at the guild's website of choice *WoWhead.com*. He expects that these raiders bring a certain level of *WoW* literacy with them to the raid. Iceman has told people before raid to do their specific preparations, and he assumes everyone has, so it hopefully makes sense to the reader that his description is much shorter, much more rehearsed, and much easier to convey quickly than mine above. His is truly a meme, almost like an unwritten script, that as I said I have heard him deliver dozens of times with virtually no variation other than occasionally referring to other people by name instead of role and occasionally peppering in more colorful language, or pausing on a role if someone speaks up to say they do not understand, though people interrupting Iceman is particularly rare on the Magmaw encounter (it only happened twice in all of my observation period). This particular encounter was what is referred to as a

"one-shot;" the group went in, coordinated, and executed their roles "as close to perfect," as Iceman would say, "as possible," and no one was dead at the end, other than the boss.

As I quoted above, Iceman said this went "as close to perfect" as it could. There were two small hiccups that the group overcame. The first is that Salty, on the second rotation, fell behind the group just enough that he was hit by the lava pillar. This shot him into the air and drained almost all of his life, but he was far enough behind the rest of the group, and just barely got hit, so that hit didn't result in everyone dying. He was poisoned by the parasites and actually died, but as a shaman, one of his skills is that he can "rebirth," or automatically "pop up" as gamers refer to it, so he was able to do exactly that and run back to the group without any serious problems. There was also a moment where the druid healer pulled aggro from Lint, but one of the Death Knights was able to taunt the boss, taking aggro off the healer, until Lint could taunt back, and due to the Death Knight's heavy armor, the druid healer was able to keep him alive in spite of taking a nearly fatal hit from Magmaw. Everything else was flawless, well timed, and well-coordinated.

**Feedback Loop Number One: Salty Get Nipped (this time)**

Allow me now to focus specifically on Salty and that tiny mistake I mentioned at the end of the last section. As I mentioned, Salty's job is to move from left to right, then right to left, then left to right, then right to left, etc. as many times as is needed in concert with the other ranged DPS and healers. This particular night was the first time Flashpoint ran this encounter, but it wasn't Salty's (or anyone in the group's) first time, and I'd been with Salty running the encounter as a member of TheSkullz for several weeks previous. Salty's ability to only get

nipped once—which he attributed to a network hiccup causing server lag[12] — was the result of his learning the encounter through the navigation of a feedback loop. First, let me offer a quick explanation of the first few pulls Salty (and others) took of the encounter. As the person who stands up by the chains and can look back, I literally had a bird's eye view of the group trying to coordinate. The very first pull, in spite of being told to all move at once and having a player (in this case Sally, from TheSkullz) mark her own head with an in-game raid marker so people had a target to follow, no one knew how to detect the cast of "lava pillar," the lava pillar exploded below seven players, and they all seven when flying into the air and fell to their deaths. This led to revelation one: watching the cast bar below Magmaw's name in the HUD at the top of the screen would allow people to see when the "lava pillar" cast began. This would be "one upped" days later by the update of a *WoW* Add-on called Deadly Boss Mods (which I explain later in this chapter) which offered a literal warning with a countdown "timer" which clearly reads "next lava pillar" with a count in hundredths of seconds. Upon finding the cast bar, Salty was able to start moving, but he found that moving when he saw the cast bar was still too late (as did several others) and for three pulls anywhere from four to all seven of those players flew into the air and died again. On the fifth pull, Salty got the timing right, but he ended up ahead of the marked player, and the others stayed with the marked player, as they were told, and… yes, they

[12] "lag" is the *WoW* version of the dog eating one's homework. It means, of course, that the user's network connection has bogged down, but since it is impossible to disprove, over half the errors recorded in my study were attributed to "lag" in some fashion. Meanwhile, the running joke is that no one believes anyone is truly lagging when a mistake is made. I take it on faith, but it is very possible this was an instance of pride based deception.

blew up, went flying into the air, and died. Just as successes in *WoW* are memetic, so sometimes are failures.

The next night Salty had the new version of DBM, and hence had timers, the mark was placed on his head, and he also began, as a habit, saying "pillar, move" quickly and monotone, over Ventrilo just as the timer was about to expire. The first pull that night was choppy, as people still didn't quite "get" the timing, but by the second pull only one person was lagging behind, and on the third pull, everyone made the first move. It would be a full hour of miscues before a few non-participant players would realize that there was a second move, but soon the group mastered the mechanic of avoiding the lava pillar, killing the parasites, and Magmaw died for the very first time for TheSkullz. In the meantime, Lint and I had our own little feedback loop going with worm taunts, bites, and chains, but it followed the same basic premise, so I'll spare the recount of number of chain leaps missed, number of times the worm accidentally snacked on my goblin instead of Lint, etc.

Salty's feedback loop occurred in this set of rules, then: in order for the ten people in the raid group to defeat Magmaw, Salty and his fellow ranged DPS and healers must avoid the lava spew. The game doesn't care how; it only cares that the players do not get hit or that the other players can survive the encounter having lost the players who die to being hit. For Salty and his cohorts, however, they must move from one side to the other in order to control the lava pillar locations (Salty took me once to a random PUG so I could see what happens when people do not group, and the result was a haphazard spread of lava pillars and small armies of parasites coming from virtually any possible position). The feedback loop literally was: 1)

evidence of an activity: lava pillar coming (denoted by timer and cast bar) 2) a revelation of the relevance of that information: to not move is to be hit 3) a reminder of consequences should an action not be taken: Salty and his friends will blow up in the air, fall and die, and 4) an action: coordinated movement to the right or left. I asked Salty if he had "learned" to dodge the lava pillar, keeping my internal dialogue about "learn" vs. "replicate" to myself at that point, and he said "well, yeah, even though I still get hit sometimes. I learned how to read the timers, when to move, how far to go. I cleaned it up." And what Salty learned—consulting timers and cast bars to know when to move, using trial and error to get the distance of his movement correct, etc. – was the generation and acquisition of gamer knowledge.

**Being in the Know: Gamer Knowledge**

Earlier in this chapter I outlined three types of gamer literacy. I'd like to now, as I move through analysis of this particular encounter, complicate that by talking specifically about types of gamer knowledge. The differentiation between literacy and knowledge for me is a subtle but important one: literacies, as I am employing the term, are skillsets, or toolsets, as it were—they are conglomerations of pieces of knowledge that gel together into something coherent. Knowledge, on the other hand, is something that could be written larger or smaller than literacy as I am utilizing it. The word knowledge here is a categorical term for my study; I consider the full domain of what I am talking about here to be knowledge, but at the same time there are smaller units of knowledge that make up these literacies which can be typed and better understood. I would not, for example, say that Lint is Magmaw literate; knowing what to do in the Magmaw encounter is an example of knowledge of a particular set of memes. I would,

however, say that he is “tanking literate,” in that he has—and knows—a specialized and particular skillset that enables him to successfully move from situation to situation behaving as a tank without needing to start from the beginning and re-learn things like when to taunt a boss, how to maintain aggro, what cooldown abilities will save him in what situations, where to stand relative to his healer, etc.

One of my major concerns as I conduct research and attempt to explain my findings is what Bob Johnson (2010) explains in his article “The Ubiquity Paradox: Further Thinking on the User-Centered Concept”: “when a concept becomes ubiquitous, it falls into danger of being used without reflection and foresight” (p. 337). Much of my previous work utilizes terminology like “literacies” and “knowledge,” a practice I continue here. I am willing to defend my use of such ubiquitous terms to the extent that they enable me to enter the existing conversation in the field, but with this undertaking I wish to carefully generate a clear set of my own terms that are in conversation with terminology in the field. My goal here is to represent the knowledge that gamers have and employ, working toward a model that allows for deep consideration of the data provided in the encounter detailed above, but at the same time I wish to balance my use of terms by keeping the concept of/term “knowledge” as both the umbrella that covers literacies and the name of the individual droplets inside the literacy puddles below it. These then are types of knowledge that would come together to form literacies, all of which would reside under the larger label of being considered “knowledge,” or to perhaps move to a step more general “that which is known.”

| Knowledge type: | Defined: | How it is gained/manifests: |
|---|---|---|
| **Latent types of knowledge** (these both relate to Aristotle's téchne) | | |
| **Tacit Knowledge** | That which is reflexive or instinctive; this could be something that one simply knows or something one has done so many times that it has become tacit. | This is knowledge gained primarily through practice/repetition, such as a typist who no longer needs to look at a QWERTY keyboard to type. |
| **Material Knowledge** | The knowledge of others, consulted or used but not actually "gained" and retained by the user. This often exists as an artifact, hence the label "material." | This is knowledge that is referenced or embodied in some sort of tool. An example of this is the *WoW* add-on Deadly Boss Mods |
| **Active Types of Knowledge** | | |
| **Actor Knowledge** (similar to Aristotle's Episteme) | The knowledge needed to be able to do things/to be an actor in a space. This would be the type of knowledge most often associated with and gained through traditional education. | This is knowledge that is learned. In a gaming sense, understanding an interface and rule set so one can play would be a prime example. |
| **Elastic/Kinetic Knowledge** (similar to Aristotle's Phronesis and also similar to James Gee's "probing the environment") | This is flexible, problem-solving knowledge, based on reacting and exploring (but not specifically or particularly on literate knowledge) | This is a type of knowledge similar to metis in many respects, in that it can appear as a "flash." It's an ability to problem solve based on previous experiences and skills. |
| **Cross-cutting Catalyst** | | |
| **Epiphany***<br><br>* It is possible this is not actually a type of knowledge but rather a phenomenon | Difficult to actually nail down; often hidden within the recursive process of problem-solving. | I think of this as a spark, or the cartoon light bulb above the head. It can't be seen, usually, but it's the type of knowledge that leads to unexpected, likely unpredictable results. |
| The blue cells indicate elements that are primarily memetic in nature. The green cell indicates the collaborative knowledge types. The purple cells are individual knowledge types. | | |

Table 4. Gamer Knowledge Type Matrix

The two types of latent gamer knowledge I wish to describe here derive directly to Aristotle's téchne, which has been employed by scholars like Bob Johnson as a form of critical crafting knowledge, or as Malea Powell would describe it a knowledge of "making." The first is what I have termed here *tacit knowledge*. Tacit knowledge further contains two types of knowledge that could be broken apart if someone else chose to view them separately: that which a person simply knows (this could go as deep as instinct if one needed it to, though for my purposes that is overkill, as game situations very rarely draw upon what might be considered a human fight-or-flight instinctive response) and that which one has known for so long/learned through such repetition that it no longer requires any sort of recognizable mental effort to recall and apply the knowledge. I am much more interested in the second type of tacit knowledge I described, as I believe it is integral to understanding users and their actions in any gaming (or technological) system.

A perfect example of tacit knowledge in this context is keyboard use (or typing, though using a computer keyboard, particularly when gaming, isn't *just* about typing). When one initially learns to type, things like "home keys" are stressed, and one begins, as I lamented with the raid group one night while discussing our high school days, by typing "a-;-a-;" repeatedly to get a sense of where the keys are situated on a QWERTY layout. Those who aren't taught to type often learn through "hunt and peck" methods that require constantly looking at the keyboard. Users over time grow used to the position of the keys, however, and eventually don't have to look down, or even consciously think about the position of their fingers, to type. The same is true for use of the arrow keys to move around a gaming environment, use of the number pad, use of the function keys that are absent from most non-computer keyboards, etc.

When speaking of his usual DPS "rotation"—the sequence of attacks used by his toon when fighting—Salty told me about how he used to look at the number pad and think through it, then he got to the point where he thought about the numbers but didn't look, until:

> Salty: Now I just think "flame shock, chain lightning, chain lighting, flame shock, etc." you know?
>
> Me: What keys are those?
>
> Salty: Um… 1, 3, I think…
>
> Me: Do you ever look over?
>
> Salty: Not really.
>
> Me: What if you get your fingers off center?
>
> Salty: Then I'm boned.

Through repetition, Salty's keyed attacks became as natural to him as typing is to those who, like anyone reading a dissertation, are so familiar with a keyboard that they don't look down or have to consciously stop to think "now I will hit the 'I' key to place the letter 'I' on the screen." In this sense, use of the keyboard as an input device may begin as another type of knowledge, but it becomes tacit knowledge for the typical gamer. A player who had to look down at the keyboard frequently would not fare as well as more keyboarding literate gamers.

*Material knowledge*, on the other hand, draws from a set of ideas that are of increasing importance to me as a rhetorician; fusing some of the thoughts I've encountered looking at material culture studies and material rhetorics (specifically class discussions and projects for Malea Powell) and the principles of Actor Network Theory as described by Latour (2007) and

embodied in *Aramis* (1996), I believe that *material objects* have *agency*, be that agency imbued by the material object's creator or by those who have read/used it. I don't mean, of course, that material objects have free will and make their own decisions, but I believe that through their use, and through their having been made by someone, material objects become carriers for knowledge, containers or conduits, or as Latour frequently refers to them "chains of translation." A simple example of this is the speed limit sign I referred to above from the Goetz article; it has the knowledge of the speed limit imbued in it, and through a radar detector it has the knowledge of the passing car's speed as well. The sign doesn't know these things in the way that I might know them, but it does know them.

Material knowledge, then, is the knowledge that constitutes the agency of a non-human actor in a system. It is also any form of knowledge that a user quite literally "uses" but doesn't gain through practice. In a wide view, this could be any piece of inconsequential knowledge that a person needs once, goes to find, uses, then discards, but it gains theoretical importance for my research when one looks at tools, such as software, that contain knowledge. An example of this that appears in my current research is the forums and wiki style interface at www.WoWhead.com. Users can add their knowledge to this web-based tool easily through a "what you see is what you get" WYSWYG interface that presents a window for typing text, buttons for uploading images or videos, a formatting bar similar to a word processor, and a submit button. This allows gamers to quickly publish their content to the web, but they do not learn to create web content; the software contains that knowledge and does that work for them. Another example would be the in-game downloadable add-on "Atlas Loot," a collected database of all the potential loot drops from each boss in *WoW*. A gamer using it can quickly

click on the name of a boss and see any item that might drop along with percentages and all of the particulars of the item. Someone, or a team of someones, compiled all that information and coded the interface, obtaining knowledge and creating some. That knowledge is embedded in the add-on and can be used by anyone who downloads it.

The next type of knowledge is something I've pegged, building from Bonnie Nardi's Activity Theory, *actor knowledge*. Actor knowledge is essentially knowledge that is learned in the most classic sense of what might be considered being "taught" to do something. This is the knowledge that one must cultivate in order to "do" the thing in question—to be an actor— so here, it would be what a gamer must learn to be able to play *WoW*. This form of knowledge is developed through reading, through the instruction of others, through observation and modeling, or through some similar method. This type of knowledge would equate well with Aristotle's (350 BCE) episteme, as it is based on what can be known and witnessed.

Actor knowledge is a highly functional type of thought, and more so than the other types of knowledge I describe here it would be relatively easy to observe, isolate, and document. There are moments in this study where I can cleanly point to instances of actor knowledge development as a part of, for example,  Salty learning to move at the right time so he doesn't become a lava pillar casualty that are concrete, black-and-white. Salty had to learn to read those timers correctly to be able to act in a timely and correct fashion.

The next type of knowledge is *elastic/kinetic knowledge*. Here "elastic" indicates the ability to stretch/flex to match different outcomes and "kinetic" indicates motion and or "work." This type of knowledge is about solving problems and applying some level of creativity

to situations. It is unlikely to exist apart from other knowledge (in fact this is true of all of these types of knowledge—they exist in largely symbiotic relationships within systems), but it is a sort of generative knowledge, honed specifically through practice and which, upon development, would likely move from the classification as elastic/kinetic knowledge into a different classification depending upon the act (likely in a string that could look like this: moment of epiphany->moment of elastic/kinetic knowledge work ->development of new actor knowledge).

I want to draw an example here from Gee's (2003) *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. In the book, he describes a practice he refers to as "probing" the environment, which basically equates to a mix of trial-and-error and immersive learning. Employed in a game, to offer a case-in-point, this would be when a group of *WoW* gamers encounter a new enemy for the first time and must attempt a variety of things to win the battle. Gee describes probing—trying things in the game environment to see what works or doesn't work— as a literate act, but I think he takes that slightly too far along in the process; probing is an elastic/kinetic knowledge practice that can result in learning, which would then add to a literacy. The practice of attempting to determine what will solve a problem, I posit, is NOT the same as learning by reading about solving a problem or watching someone else solve a problem. This parallels, in some ways, the heart of what Aristotle (350 BCE) describes as phronesis, as this is a type of knowledge that specifically considers change (solving a problem) and would generally work toward a better quality of life, though in gaming the stakes are likely not viewed as being nearly as high as they would be for Aristotle.

Finally, there is epiphany, which is critical to understanding the innovations made by players within gaming systems. This is a catalyst. It's a spark. In the cartoon world, it's the moment when the light bulb appears above the head of the character. It's wit. It's wisdom. It's the gut feeling the experienced detective gets in a cop drama. It's a moment. It's epiphany.

I do not believe epiphany can exist apart from other knowledge. I'm not sure I would argue that any of the types of knowledge I've indicated here can exist long apart from the others, but I think epiphany above all evades the "look, it's an epiphany!" moment, as it will instantly translate into the use of another type of knowledge in that symbiotic relationship I mentioned previously. Metaphorically, epiphany is the intelligent hand reaching into the bag of tricks. I also don't believe it can be taught, and I don't believe it is precisely "learned." I believe it is developed, honed through practice, and I believe that in some—but certainly not all—cases it might be innate, a function of an individual's creative thinking. I'm not even positive it is a type of knowledge and not simply the result of various knowledges colliding, but I believe its presence needs to be looked at and understood.

The closest I can come to pointing out a moment of epiphany is to talk about something Iceman showed me while running a dungeon one night. We faced an enemy—a blood mage—who casts something called "rage zone." The rage zone is a red bubble that is about 10 feet in diameter in game space, and any time the enemies stand inside it, they are given a 50% damage done increase "buff." Likewise any player characters who step into the zone take a 50% increase to damage taken. Because of this, players run from the bubble and a tank—in the case of this night with Iceman, me—has to work hard to get the enemies out of the bubble without

walking into the bubble himself to get "totally pwned in the face." Iceman walked into it. And suddenly, everything died. He explained "it doesn't say in the debuff [indicator on the screen], but as a mage, I get the same 50% increase the blood mage gets in here. If I don't get hit, I can just nuke shit. So keep them off me." When I asked him how he found out, I assumed that I'd get a story similar to those I've heard from other people about finding bugs in games or little glitches in the system—that he accidentally discovered it or heard from someone who heard from someone who found it by happenstance. But Iceman's reason was different: "I thought about how the game must handle that buff. The Blood mage is a mage. I'm a mage. If it's buffing by class, that's me, too." Epiphany in action: the click between Iceman's understanding of what it meant to be a mage (his toon knowledge) and what buffs in *WoW* do as a function of the rule set. He cleverly realized that the odds were good that since he, too, was a mage, just like the enemy the zone was meant to empower, he could benefit from the empowerment.

Taken as a whole, I realize these classifications and tools might seem a bit elaborate, but what they enable me, and what I propose they will enable others, to do is to isolate specific moments in my research and trace them through what type of knowledge they are to their home as a part of a literacy. In other words, these classifications and tools allow a researcher to take a chunk of game observation and translate it into something applicable to other situations both inside and outside of gaming, and at the same time the tools enable me to take something that might translate poorly, like "you shit the bed on the double damage phase since you're such a raging bad" into "because you weren't aware of your toon's talents, and you didn't maximize your inputs, you underperformed seriously during the portion of that encounter

where you received a 200% damage output increase. You need to work on your situational awareness and add to your material knowledge of this encounter."

**The Distance to Here: Raid Preparation**

For a moment let's go back to the start of the pull of Magmaw, and let's stand next to Lint and look up at the massive worm. He didn't just walk in here. None of the ten players here "just" came to the raid this night, or any of the other nights over my six months observing Flashpoint. In this section I will discuss the preparations made for raiding by walking through a different aspect of preparation with different participants. This is also one of the places in the research where I will, at times, stress my own experiences in contrast since these are preparations I went through with these participants and my perspective offers a point of contrast/triangulation. I don't wish to assert that anyone's experience here, of course, is absolute. The experiences of this particular group preparing to raid, however, were relatively homogenous, and as a seasoned player myself, I had little trouble adapting to their style.

To begin to understand raid preparation, the best place to go is to the raid leader and tank, in this case, Lint. Informally speaking, based on the input of my participants and of other people I've spoken with during my research, tanking is the job which is most exhausting and most stress inducing for *WoW* players. I knew the ins and outs of tanking as a practice—which is to say I was tanking literate—when I joined Flashpoint, because I knew that was a role that would allow me to give back to the group, and I didn't want to come into their collective as a know-nothing. For the two weeks before Flashpoint started raiding, though, I spent a number of my nights running "heroic random" dungeons with Lint, both of us trading off tank duty, to

earn some gold to bolster the guild's supplies and to practice. As we went through that process, and of course on into the raiding schedule, I spoke at length with Lint about what it meant to prepare to raid tank.

"First, you have to be chill," he told me. "It's going to be my fault most of the time when we wipe, and you're going to hear me apologizing and then eventually raging over it." This, in my observation, is the plight of every tank, and it was something Lint took to heart each time we did much of anything. The role of the tank, as I said above, is to hold the aggro of the enemies in any encounter. One nickname tanks are given in game is "meat shield," as the goal is for them to soak damage and hold attention while other things happen. On the surface, this probably sounds easy, and in some circumstances, it is. Lint and I have both talked about playing in dungeons where we are over-geared and hence have vast statistical superiority so we've gotten aggro on something and gone, as he often does, to check on his children, or as I often do to refill my beverage. But in raid environments, in particular, maintaining aggro and mitigating damage can be quite challenging.

The reason the role of tank is so stressful for players is that in a raid encounter like the one I described above, Lint is the only toon capable of taking more than one or two hits from Magmaw without dying. If he loses aggro, the only chance the raid has not to lose members in rapid succession is for one of the two plate armor wearing DPS to grab aggro (the two Death Knights) and for Lint to taunt back off of that toon before a third hit lands. Magmaw would easily one shot kill any of the other DPS and any of the healers. So Lint losing aggro almost certainly means catastrophe for the group.

But the tank's responsibility is also to control the area and direct the fight, at least in as much as that the boss—or in the case of non-boss encounters the trash mobs—go where the tank takes them. In the Magmaw fight this isn't a major issue, as Lint can only make Magmaw look one way of the other—Magmaw is rooted to the floor. But in other encounters, such as the one I will describe in Chapter 4, Lint's ability to move a boss around the encounter space is critical to the other nine players being able to do their jobs. So while it is true that a raid group is a ten person unit where everyone has to work together to succeed, minor failures by the other nine toons can be worked around. A one second lapse in judgment by the tank means the encounter is over.

Over that two week preparation period, Lint did a number of things to prepare for the Flashpoint raid. He started by "hitting Tankspot and EJ," meaning www.tankspot.com and the Tankspot videos housed on YouTube and www. Elitistjerks.com, a web forum run by one of the most successful guilds in all of *WoW* that is now open to everyone and serves as a sort of think-tank for anyone who is willing to venture into an atmosphere that is fairly aptly named, a collective of highly critical, often rude, but almost always right players who do graduate study level math and an almost unspeakable number of trials to insure that they have enough data to make their claims.

Tankspot's content is targeted at breaking down encounters from the tank's perspective, and as Lint was quick to point out to me, there were, before Cataclysm launched, a number of videos already posted (from Tankspot members in the beta test) which showed the basics of the early fights, like Magmaw. Lint linked me to a number of videos that he watched,

and as he talked to me about them he started to sound less like someone discussing a video game and more like a basketball coach breaking down video of an opponent, looking for tendencies and talking about what was working and wasn't. While watching one video, he said to me "see when the tank goes into Magmaw's mouth? Guardian spirit as it starts, then I'm counting… word of glory here *a pause* then here *pause* then here… that's going to help heals a bunch." The spells Lint mentioned in the quote are Paladin self-heals, and he was actually building for himself a sort of timing cheat sheet based on the video so he could maximize his own ability to withstand damage during the worst part of the encounter.

Lint went on to read every bit of information he could about Magmaw on Tankspot.com (an amount he describes as "pages and pages, fool. Pages and pages"), and he watched the videos for the next three encounters and began studying them as well. As the day of the first raid came closer, he went ahead and watched videos for all of the raid content, though he spent most of his time concentrating on the first three or four encounters. The week before the first raid he even "pugged" into a run of Blackwing Descent so he could see the fight, though in that case he didn't tank (he DPSed and told me he actually did less damage than usual so he could watch the tank carefully).

The experience of going to Elitist Jerks was less about the specific fight and more about insuring that his spec was correct. A "spec," in *WoW* terms, is the set of talents that a player uses along with the glyphs he or she chooses to enhance those talents. I've included a visual representation of Lint's spec below as figure 8. It is the stance of Blizzard that players can customize their specs in myriad ways and play effectively, but the Blizzard definition of

"effective" and the Elitist Jerks definition of "effective" are not the same. The brain trust at Elitist Jerks is at its core a group of min/maxers, or gamers who look to get the maximum gain from the minimum input. While on the site, Lint used only one message board thread to tweak his Paladin, but that thread was, at that time, 18 pages and included a number of links to external resources. The thread (still available at the time of this this writing) continued to grow, however, and is now well over 25 pages long (each page containing 10 posts). The authors of these posts are all dedicated gamers, each adding to the collective knowledge. There are, suggested in the thread, four "valid" raid specs for a tank in Cataclysm: The guardian (focusing on defense spells to aid other raid members), the striker (more single target DPS), the haymaker (more area of effect DPS—or crowd control) and the wogger (focusing on a specific self-healing spell). Each of the four has specific benefits, which Lint weighed carefully when considering what he, and what Flashpoint, needed. The wogger spec—which depended upon a spell called "Word of Glory"(hence the name "wog"er)—was about to be outmoded by a patch to the game which lessened the benefit of the spell, so Lint described to me the process of choosing among the other three. "It's not a big difference," he noted, "but the guardian spec has more protection for other raid members without much of a loss to DPS or threat, but I tweaked it a little based on some of the other posts. I like what I came up with."

In addition to spec info, the Elitist Jerks thread included lists of potential gear, gems and enchants, the best professions for the class, as well as a suggested "rotation" of talents to use in combat. Lint pointed out that these haven't changed greatly since he first learned, but he did find nice solutions to problems that the arrival of the expansion has brought him, particularly in terms of how to compensate for changes to key abilities, like his area of effect threat spell,

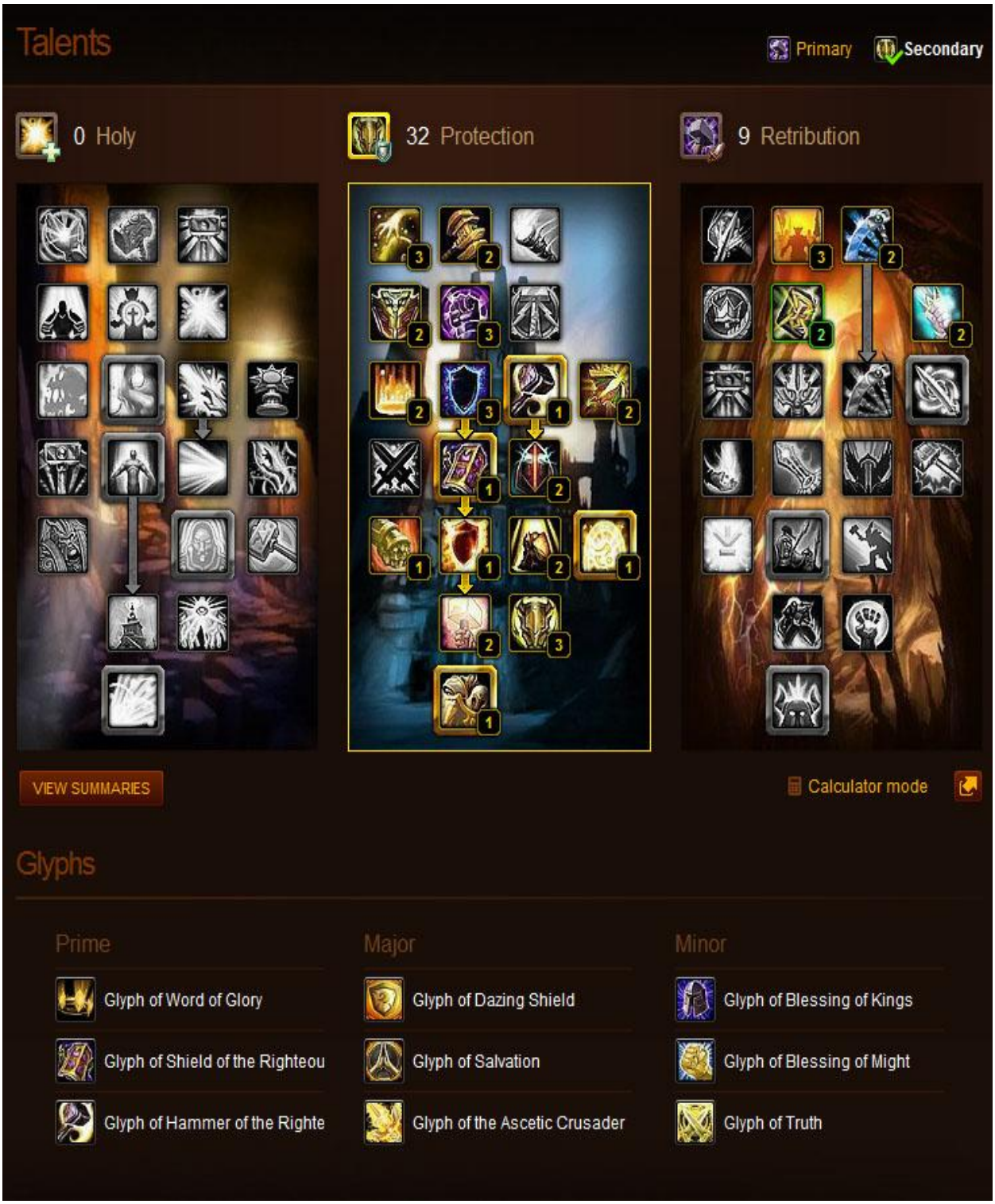


Figure 8: Lint's Spec (a screen capture; text not relevant)

consecrate, which was moved from a 10 second cooldown to a 30 second cooldown (meaning it could be used only a third as often as before). Through the Elitist Jerks discussion thread, Lint found that he could "move it in the rotation and count more on my [avenger's] shield and the new proc [wherein some general movements trigger a "free" extra avenger's shield cast]. That'll work."

Looking at Lint's spec in print is a bit like reading a vague personal ad on a dating site; it's not really "him," nor does any of the texture his play brings to the toon shine through, but it is an artifact that reflects his gaming experience. And it is starting from this artifact that the presence of gaming knowledge in Lint's pre-raid routine can be unpacked. The Tankspot and Elitist Jerks websites, as well as the videos mentioned, are prime examples of material knowledge, just like Lint's spec visualized above, which at one point another guild member who is not a participant in my research utilized, along with discussion with Lint and myself, to create a new paladin tank. These are instances where other player's actor knowledge has been distilled and shaped into the things that I refer to herein as artifaqs: they are static artifacts that contain in them the results of knowledge processes: of learning through elastic/kinetic knowledge development, of moments of metis-inspired probing, of moments of trial-and-error, and of moments of consulting other material artifacts.

Forgive me if I am a touch heavy-handed here, but this serves as the first illustration of how the theoretical tools I've presented string together. The things—the websites, the videos, the specs—are digital artifacts. They represent collectives of actor knowledge, elastic/kinetic knowledge, consultation with other material knowledge, and moments inspired by epiphany

that crystallized into new knowledge that can be passed on to others. But moreover, memes emerge from all of this knowledge: the four specs, what a player should do if he or she chooses a specific profession, what glyphs and enchants to use, how to open a fight with high threat to maintain aggro: all of these things are repeated and confirmed, polished and at least as much as gaming knowledge can be "canonized" as replicatable, and oft replicated, actions. These finally, then, upon study by the gamer translate into practices taken by individual players, replicating the memes and eventually transforming some to tacit knowledge while retaining others as material knowledge for future consultation. It is, in fact, quite similar to how one might learn to complete any of a number of tasks with two distinct differences: there's no unified "authority," "boss," or "teacher" here (ethos is earned through success and innovation, but it doesn't adhere the way it might in a workplace) and unlike so many of the learning tasks that are often the focus of study, gamers choose to learn these things as their pass time, as they unwind from work or the other stresses of their life. This is "fun." This is a thought I will return to many times, but it warrants stressing here: the participants in my study spend money, and a great deal of time and energy, to do this as recreation. Lint loves playing and takes great pride in his ability to tank, and he considers all the preparation described here to be "part of the game, man."

**Feedback Loop Number Two: Lint's Feedback Loop for Magmaw**

I mentioned earlier that Lint and I (and that other DK, who was following my lead) had a feedback loop scenario of our own going while Salty and the ranged players dealt with their lava pillars. Ours went like this:

Lint: 1) evidence of an activity: Angry worm exists 2) a revelation of the relevance of that

information: it's going to eat people if I don't taunt  3) a reminder of consequences should an action not be taken: everyone will die, and 4) an action: taunt, attack, taunt

Lint knew this because of his actor knowledge, elastic/kinetic knowledge, and consultation with other material knowledge as described above. He had prepared well, so he was able to succeed.

Me: 1) evidence of an activity: Magmaw is going to bite Lint 2) a revelation of the relevance of that information: If someone else doesn't taunt, everyone will die. And then someone needs to jump on that spike.  3) a reminder of consequences should an action not be taken: everyone will die, one by one and 4) an action: death grip (taunt), leap on spike, spam 1 key, chain head, kill, kill, kill.

I knew this because, due to my own ethical belief that I needed to be at least as good as the middle-range player in the group so my research wasn't hindering the collective, I prepared as hard as Lint, Salty and Iceman. I, too, had all the knowledge I needed going into that encounter. Though in the name of full disclosure, I did click on the spike too quickly once, miss, and go flying into the lava pillar.

**Getting Gear and Stocking Supplies: World of Workcraft**

My other participants tell similar stories of their road to being raid ready. Iceman wasn't as concerned with specs and rotations (as he knew that already) but spent a tremendous amount of time running heroic level dungeons—the five person instance content right before raids—and gaining reputation with various factions while training his professions so he could have the best possible gear. He told me in particular of an all-nighter the day before the first

raid because he “needed a fucking wand. I had a green—that’s a stat killer.” A “green” item is of only moderate value, a step below blue (which is rare), purple (which is epic—what most raiders have and expect others to have) and the elusive, nearly impossible to obtain orange legendary. “I had to keep queuing for randoms to hope for Grim Batol so I could beat that second boss and hope he had my wand!” he said, as I myself recalled tanking several of the runs that night to help him.

For Salty, though, raid prep was a bit different still. Salty has taken on, as his pseudonym might lead one to expect, the role of being the guild’s fisherman and cook. He is also the herb gatherer, supplying the guild’s alchemist—which happened to be my toon at that time— with materials to make flasks and potions. Flasks, potions, and buff food are three critical elements of raiding because they carry significant statistical increases (often each—a potion, a flask, and a food item—will improve stats more than a single upgraded piece of gear). In many guilds, as Iceman and Lint were quick to remind me, leadership insists that the individual raiders provide their own food, flasks and potions, but in Flashpoint the goal was to insure that casual raiders were well prepared, so the guild splits up the labor of gathering everything so that no one has to do without. Early on, though, “splitting it up” between the small core who existed two weeks previous to the first raid (my participants, myself, and one other player who was rarely online) meant a lot of work for only a few people. Lint was busy learning all his tanking duties. Iceman—who maintains raid level toons on two different servers—was off raiding and learning encounters and gearing himself. Leah took it upon herself to provide gold so that the guild could afford to repair gear (damage is incurred with each encounter, particularly if a player dies, and as one might guess from my explanations, dying as the group faces new encounters is

quite common), so most of her time was spent playing on the *WoW* auction house the way many play on eBay, buying low, selling high, determining what was sparse and locating it to turn a profit. That left Salty and me to do the other preparation tasks.

Herein lies an interesting example of something that I believe is akin to, but certainly not precisely like, Jay David Bolter and David Grusin's (1999)"remediation." Gathering herbs is a process of flying around, seeing herbs, and landing to pick them, which is a bit like what I imagine gathering herbs in real life would be like, but the fishing process is so similar to actually fishing that it's almost humorous. To catch the fish that are needed for "end game" (meaning raid quality) fish feasts, which was what Flashpoint needed, a toon would need a fishing rating of 450. The rating goes up fast for the first 100 points (every catch), but at 100 it slows to one point every 5-8 catches. I didn't literally do the math, but I know that in order to get to 450 both Salty and myself earned an achievement for catching 1000 fish, then 2000 fish, and we were still fishing. A player must also level cooking to 450 to make the feast, but luckily all the fish caught along the way can be cooked, so the two skills level symbiotically. Once of the proper level, the fisherman must then locate the right areas to catch the fish needed. A raid feast at the time of my research—the seafood magnifique feast-- was made by cooking two highland guppy, two lavascale catfish and two fathom eel. On a typical raid progression raid night—attempting any new content—a group will go through 20-30 of these. This meant that Salty (and me, to a lesser extent) needed to catch 180 fish of a specific type for each night of raiding, with two caveats: highland guppy and fathom eel can be fished from pools, which means that a fisherman can look for places where they can be caught and fish them up relatively easily (four to six catches per pool), but lavascale catfish don't swim in schools, so

there's a truly random element to catching them, and, of course, starting from zero the guild needed to build a stockpile. Hence there was a great deal of fishing.

The fishing interface in *WoW* is similar to the fishing interfaces in other games. The toon holds a fishing rod and hits a button to cast. The bobber then bobs when fish is hooked, and the toon clicks to reel in. This is generally a successful process unless the toon isn't high enough level for the area being fished. In those cases, sometimes things get away or the toon catches something like a boot or a ball of string. The activity is repetitive and unlike combat rather low-key. In fact some toons, as a matter of RP, set up a little camp and sit while they fish.

The knowledge involved in fishing in WoW is somewhat minimal: Salty regularly checks www.Wowhead.com to see what open water yield rates are for specific areas, but otherwise, it's a matter of repeated, perfectly memetic, click to cast, watch for bob, click to reel in activity. But the practice of fishing nestles into an interesting position as a WoW activity; it is necessary, and it is at times tedious, but it is also an act that allows for tremendous amounts of multitasking.

For example, I asked Salty what he does while he fishes. His response was "I usually watch TV, or listen to music. Sometimes I browse, read WoWhead, etc." He went on to tell me about watching specific movies, or sporting events, while fishing, but what stuck with me was that he was fishing, I was fishing, and we were talking about when he fishes. Then we talked about raiding. Then we talked about his toon. Then other guildies logged in, and we chatted casually. We were, essentially, fishing, minus the physical elements of the worms, and water, and with much better luck than at least I have ever had in real life.

The most intriguing element of Salty's prep is that he was doing what are menial tasks in-game, but he still considered them fun and felt highly motivated to complete these tasks carefully and completely. In a real-life scenario, walking around gathering plants, or fishing up hundreds of useful fish, is an activity that most would consider laborious if an emphasis was placed not on the practice but on results (as it is in *WoW*—fishing just to fish, or picking herbs just to pick herbs, is fine, but the goal for a raid group is to obtain volume, to stockpile for use). In game, however, it's viewed as part of the fun.

**The Fishback Loop**

1) evidence of an activity: Fish feasts exist 2) a revelation of the relevance of that information: if there are no fish feasts, the group is at a disadvantage 3) a reminder of consequences should an action not be taken: the group will have less success if there is a disadvantage, and 4) an action: click, wait for bob, click, click on fish to add to inventory, click, wait for bob, click, click, click, click.

or even more simplistic:

1) evidence of an activity: there's some water 2) a revelation of the relevance of that information: I could fish 3) a reminder of consequences should an action not be taken: if I don't fish, I have to go buy fish, because I need fish, and 4) an action: click, click, click, click, click

**Add-ons and the Application of Material Knowledge to the Interface**

The last point of stress from Iceman, as a raid leader, was that everyone have the proper raiding add-ons and tweaks made to their user interface. While to some user interface changes might seem—and even be—highly cosmetic, the additional utility that can be tapped by taking

on other people's material knowledge, encapsulated in various modules, is powerful. See below figure 9, the *WoW* default UI and 10, a DPS UI set up as Iceman requested for raiding.


Figure 9: *WoW* default UI (text in image not relevant)

Iceman was very specific about certain add-ons he expected each raid member to have. The first, and "most critical" was Deadly Boss Mods, a robust add-on that adds timers and warnings for some specific raid events, the very add-on that rescued Salty from the lava pillars. DBM encapsulates via material knowledge the timing cues and crafts counters that do not exist in-game. It is interesting that some gaming purists might consider DBM—and in fact even websites like WoWhead—to be "cheating," but that mentality doesn't exist in *WoW*.


Figure 10: Customized Raid UI (only red outlined text is relevant)

The other elements that Iceman requested that raiders have were less intensive in terms of what they add to the game but are far more visually apparent. The first is a program called power auras which displays a visual effect on the screen when a particular event happens. This is user-designated; the example in 3.13 is a death knight who has forgotten a buff (so the power aura is present to make the player aware that he needs to cast the spell for the buff). The next is a pair of monitoring modules, recount—which keeps statistics like damage done, healing done, a death log, etc.—easy data for feedback loops, as a DPS will want to DPS better, a healer to heal more, etc., and Omen—a threat meter so that the player knows how close he or she is from pulling a target away from the tank (quick tank feedback loop—1) evidence of an activity: someone other than me is at the top of Omen  2) a revelation of the relevance of that

information: that person has aggro, not me 3) a reminder of consequences should an action not be taken: that person is about to die, and 4) an action: TAUNT! AAAAAH!). There's also Titan Panel, a small toolbar that holds information like game access latency, how much gold the player has, the state of the player's gear (how close to damaged vs. repaired), and a host of slots for other add-ons (such as toggle switches for Omen and Recount, should the player want them off the screen for a short period). The others are visual replacements for existing elements that add to functionality. The first is bartender, a program that allows for the movement and reconfiguration of the toolbars that hold skills/spells. The change this makes to the user's ability to access skills is dramatic, as can be seen in the two screenshots above. Added to this is a small program called "omniCC" which places cooldown timers on the buttons for any skill (showing the user when it is usable again, or "cooled down"—quick OmniCC feedback loop: 1) evidence of an activity: my Obliterate skill just cooled down 2) a revelation of the relevance of that information: I could cast Obliterate 3) a reminder of consequences should an action not be taken: Every second I don't cast Obliterate, I'm losing DPS, and 4) an action: hit 1 key to cast Obliterate). Related to casting, typically a player gets a small cast bar when completing any ability, but the add-on Quartz makes that bar much larger and prominent. It also adds large cast bars for opponents and bosses. Rounding out the collection are two minor UI swaps: an add-on called Mappy that makes the map larger and more functional (removing the oddly imposed circular shape that Blizzard coded into the game) and a chat add-on called PRAT which allows for color coding and font changes to the chat box, making in-game chat easier to read.

These add-ons, as I mentioned before, are fantastic examples of in-game digital artifacts holding material knowledge, as they allow a user to take his or her specific knowledge and encapsulate it into something others can download and use, preserved as accessible material knowledge. They also dramatically change the gaming experience, something that Iceman pointed out one night when playing on a different machine. “Fuck! I don’t have counters!” he said, repeatedly as he was hit by everything from lava pillars to spewing cones of cold, and the lack of his specific bartender key binds left him typing random characters into chat when he attempted to reflexively react with a spell, since in an interface without bartender, the ` key simply places a “`” in chat.

**Back to the “Pull:” Magmaw Revisited**

And so I return again to standing next to Lint as he pulls Magmaw. I realized, while reading my account of that specific encounter, even as I checked my field notes, screen caps, logs, etc., that it feels shockingly familiar. There is a reason for that. The basic Magmaw encounter, as I described it here, is a moment of neat, virtually perfect proof of my hypothesis that *WoW* gaming is highly memetic. Every week, I virtually stand next to Lint, my stocky little goblin twitching, holding a sword roughly the size of his body in each hand, and we stare at a worm the height of a building. I turn every week and see Salty and Leah, already placing heal-over-time spells on Lint, on me, on Iceman, who paces in game as I imagine he would in real life as he finishes his spiel. Then, crackling over the headphones, Iceman says “time for a ready check,” and a box pops up. I click ready, as does everyone else. Then Lint counts down from three, and we do what I described in the middle of the chapter, moving like a well-

choreographed dance of dangerous pixels, now habitually doing what we concentrated so hard on making sure we did that first night.

Magmaw is a copy of a copy of a copy. Sometimes the group composition changed a bit, but the roles remained the same. Each time, we did exactly what we did that very first time, because the plan worked, the research was done, the tools were there, and the replication of those practices, with the right timing, meant success. We knew that encounter because we learned it. The only time it went differently is if someone made a mistake, and that person often had to face a friendly but harsh criticism, first from Iceman, then slowly from everyone else if it happened more than once.

At the end of my research period, I checked my character statistics. During my time with Flashpoint, we killed Magmaw 36 times. 36 times replicating those patterns, each time a little faster to the kill, each time gaining confidence in each other because repetition of success directly equates to ethos in *WoW*. Flashpoint—or at least my four participants from Flashpoint and myself—are little meme machines, precise and careful, with an eye for detail and a richly developed toolset for raiding.

In this chapter, I've exhibited what brought my four participants to their first raid together, what their first success looked like, and how gamer knowledge and memetic activity can be easily identified and cultivated in the gaming space as long as things go well. The Magmaw encounter is, of course, but one of the many, many encounters in *WoW*, but it serves well to illustrate precisely what it is about raiders that is worthy of careful consideration: the encounter is memetic, and on the face of it can be understood as a series of small, easily

navigated steps, but those steps move from singular actions which are easy to quickly parse into a heaving, writhing read-react-reread-rereact-preact-read-act frenzy in a matter of seconds. One of the things that an explanation in text might minimize that is important to remember is that I was able, here, to divide up the roles to describe them. And I was able to speak of them in a single voice. In the game, nine other people are enacting nine of those roles and speaking out nine of those sets of dialogue, and it's all happening so quickly that a matter of milliseconds of network lag—fractions of a second—can result in failure.

This places primacy on three key elements: 1) understanding of the memetic nature of the entire encounter (not just what "I" do, but what the royal "you" do), 2) understanding of why and how each thing happens, and 3) the wherewithal, agency and confidence to act in defiance of the meme when the clock is quite literally ticking and success depends on not just adjustment but explanation—at least to some of the others—of the adjustment made. That's what it takes to kill a gigantic lava worm. That's how success or failure is measured in a raid. That's how learning is applied by gamers to what, while "a game" is a relatively complicated task. In the raid environment not knowing something is only a detriment if one refuses to learn said something; the learning is part and parcel of the game experience itself. And there are nine people there who are pretty sure it's important that the remaining person learn, and learn correctly and competently, what to do.

In some senses, it all comes down to group dynamics. In Chapter 4, I turn the focus much more on the interpersonal dynamics of the group as things become a little more

complicated , a few things go wrong, people fail to learn what they need to learn to handle encounters, some people walk away, and the difficulty/variability of the encounters ramps up.

## Chapter 4: "Know Your Role and (probably never) Shut Your Mouth:" Digital Identity in *World of Warcraft*

*There are ten of us, standing in a circle, staring at a huge bell. We're about to find out how many adventurers it takes to kill a blind dragon named Atramedes.*

*All around the room there ornate ceremonial stands holding lavish gongs. They form a pair of abstract brackets—five on each side of the room— confining us inside a round portion of the chamber. Above us, there's a loud, thwapping sound, like a flag in the wind. Over and over—twack, twack, twack.*

*I can hear Lint explaining what is about to happen, his gravelly voice low and calm. He's well into explaining the encounter, and I'm pacing out my own steps—slide to the left, slide to the right, run to the center, then toward the bell. I check my axes, make sure I have the right gear, glance down and notice that Salty has set out food. I eat. Lint is still speaking. He's about to remind the group's one mage, the only person who is both a ranged attacker and has the ability to instantly move 20 yards by blinking, of her duties in the fight.*

*"And Sally, your job here is going to be to hit those gongs, at the times we talked about. When the dragon starts his major cast, then any time someone has the fire trailing after them during his flight phase. Got it?"*

*Atramedes is a blind dragon. He can't see us, nor will he ever see us. But he can detect us via the sound waves he shrieks out. That's where the gongs come in. When Sally hits one, it is so loud that the dragon locks onto the noise and forgets about the ten little raiders poking it with their sharp sticks.*

*Normally people respond to Lint with a "sure," or "right-o" or "I'm on it." I usually say "word up," but that's because I listened to too much rap as a lil goblin.*

*Sally is silent, but her push-to-talk is on. We can hear her sigh.*

*"Got it?"*

*She replies, "Why am I on gongs? "*

*"We talked about this. You can blink from gong to gong. No one else in the group can."*

*"Can't you hit the gongs?"*

*"I'm tanking."*

*"Can't Salty do it?"*

*"He's in melee range here. He'd have to run way out. It's easy. You just go in a big circle from gong to gong while we fight the dragon."*

*The conversation ends with Sally agreeing to hit the gongs, but only after suggesting that three other people do it instead. Lint slams his mace into the bell and the massive blind dragon descends upon us. We all launch into motion, working in a circle around the creature, darting back and forth to dodge the beast's many attacks. Sally hits a first gong, and the dragon rears back. Things are going well.*

*Then the dragon takes the sky. As it happens, he chooses to spew his fire breath at me. I take off running, my tiny legs churning as fast as they possibly can. I feel the fire licking at my heels. I use my rocket jump ability to propel forward. "Gong!" I call out. Nothing happens. "I*

*need a gong, Sally!" Still nothing. I'm out of room. I hit the wall, like a cartoon coyote who fell for the fake cave opening the roadrunner painted on a cliff face. The fire beam hits me. I die, falling back first to the floor, my axes crossed neatly across my charred chest. The dragon's fire takes off toward a hunter, who also screams "Gong! I NEED A GONG!" Nothing happens. He, too, perishes. This pattern continues, as two more die.*

*The dragon lands, and with almost half of our contingent dead, we just don't have enough forces to make a stand. One by one, the other six fall. As our ghosts come to claim our bodies, Lint asks the question I am sure all of us are thinking, "Sally, what happened with the gongs there?"*

*"Oh my god, you guys! I missed," she says, plainly. No apologies. No real sense of concern. "I don't see why I have to…"*

*Listening in, Iceman cuts her off "how the FUCK do you miss a gong four times? Is your mouse dead? You just click the fucking gong! You can't 'miss'—it's not a skill. The gong isn't defending itself. You just click!"*

*Sally logs off. We don't see her again until the next day, when she will claim her network connection cut out.*

*And for at least that night, the dragon gets the best of us.*

In this chapter, I wish to focus not on one specific raid encounter as I did previously, but instead on interpersonal dynamics across several months of following the raid group, as well as their behavior in game but outside of the specific "raid" time/space. My goal here is to place the focus on identity formation and maintenance to stress that not everything about a raider and the raid group happens just within the parameters of the raid instance. More specifically, I will be looking at what the field refers to as "digital identity"—identities forged and maintained in digital/internet spaces.

This works hand-in-hand with the idea of gaming roles, a concept that is of tremendous importance to a MMORole-Playing-Game. As I will illustrate in this chapter through careful look at my study data, gamer roles orbit digital identity in interesting ways. The most important way is this: incongruent senses of gamer role will lead to fragmented digital identity and group chaos. This came into stark relief when looking at the leader of the guild I started my research with, TheSkullz, and the way her misunderstanding of her own role and her inability to navigate her identity led to a breakdown in the guild—and raid group's—ability to proceed.

That specific example, which I will elaborate upon later in the chapter, brings to the surface the key issues that digital identity presents in gaming space. First and foremost, the "toon" on the screen is an individual, but that individual—while not "precisely" the user—cannot be separated from the user, or perhaps the better way to interpret it is that the toon contains large portions of that user. The relevance here, and what is important for considerations of digital identity moving forward, is that toons are not that different from any other online avatar or social networking profile. Scholars must make every attempt to

understand the fusion of user and creation—of actor or author and authored creation—in order to really understand how any person establishes an identity in digital space. As the members of Flashpoint illustrate in this chapter, the negotiation is complex and dynamic. As with the previous chapters, however, allow me to start by establishing some terms and exploring a few key thoughts. In this case, I turn to the work of Dr. Lisa Nakamura.

I wish to begin my consideration of digital identity in *World of Warcraft* by recognizing and modifying Nakamura's concept of "Identity Tourism" (2002). It is only logical that identity tourism is at-play in a gaming environment like *WoW.* After all, the game begins with a player choosing and customizing a toon to deploy in the game world. This means that gamers start by adopting a new face, a new race, a new name, and presumably a new role, as it is doubtful that many *WoW* players slay dragons for a living. At the same time, each of my participants, and in fact each of the "regular" members of the raiding group, had highly structured, carefully maintained, and constantly written and re-written identities that included, but were certainly not limited to, their roles within the raid group.

**The Real, Identity, and Play: Constructing Vacation Selves in Magic Circles**

Perhaps the most important question that a rhetoric scholar looking at gaming studies for the first time might want to ask—a question I've wrestled with for nearly a decade now—is how to differentiate between "in the game" and "in *real* life" when speaking about players and their characters. The word most often at issue—and the idea most often at issue, to tunnel just a bit deeper—is "real," as in "what is real?" and "are those people real?" I find my foundation

for discussing the real in the same place popular culture did in the 1990s film *The Matrix*: the work of Jean Baudrillard.

Digital rhetoric—and in fact much of contemporary science fiction and popular culture aside from scholarly thought—owes a great debt to Baudrillard, as is expertly illustrated by the work of Donna Haraway (1991), Johndan Johnson-Eilola (1997, 2005) and Stuart Moulthrop (1991). A philosopher arguably years ahead of the curve, Baudrillard's contributions to the field's ways of thinking and seeing are many, but the most oft invoked and arguably most powerful is the idea that what is "real" has, due to replication and simulation, become an abstract principle itself. In "the Procession of Simulacra," Baudrillard (1994) writes:

> By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of the truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. (p. 2)

From Baudrillard's perspective, "real" is gone, or is so far away that it can no longer be accessed. In one sense, it is as if he claims that humanity is so far separated from "real" that real is no longer a word with any true meaning. If the real is gone or inaccessible, how does one ever determine what is "real?" On the other hand, however, I would suggest that an equally generous reading of Baudrillard is this: if the real is gone, it means that those things oft considered "obvious" fabrications are as *real* as anything else. In other words, there isn't *real*ly a profound separation between "in *real* life" and "in-game *real*," other than in the clear division made by players of "IRL" being a domain outside of game space wherein the toons they know

and engage in the game with go to "bio"—polite terminology for when one must visit the rest room—to obtain food or beverage, to attend to family or pets, to answer phones, to go to work, etc.

This consideration of "real" has a direct and tangible impact on my research hypotheses. One of the assertions in particular I set out to prove or disprove in this research project was this:

> *Gamers, acting to one degree or another as identity tourists, will tend to play with gamers who will assist them in practices that allow the gamer to own his or her constructed identity and feel as if they are truly experiencing it—to make it "real."*

What I anticipated I would see, based on previous experiences and earlier research, is that gamers would craft identities that complement their play style and goals, and that once those identities were established, the player would do all he or she could to maintain and cultivate that identity, seeking specific types of groups and doing specific sorts of in-game activities.

To begin to understand a gamer's digital identity, first one must understand the game space itself, as identity formation in gaming is so intimately tied to the interface and the gaming space, or in other words the rules that bound that "reality." Gaming studies has tried to designate names for this space before: "game world," "virtual world," "synthetic worlds (Castronova, 2005)", "Affinity spaces (Gee, 2007)," etc. but the most suited label for this communal space comes from the work of Johan Huizenga (often cited by Bonnie Nardi in her

gaming work) who referred to it as “the magic circle.” Huizenga (1971) describes the magic circle:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand … The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

In other words, gamers visit a place within this magic circle, in the case of *WoW* gamers a place called Azeroth, which is “like” the *real* world but is cordoned off, made special by its use in play. And in this magic circle, gamers assume specific identities that could be—and often are—quite different from their identities in the *real* world. In this space, I assert, they will join and mesh well with—ultimately “staying with”—groups that share their basic desires in relation to what, exactly, they do inside that magic circle, in Azeroth. In other words, they will want to play with other toons who allow them to have a coherent, “real,” in-game experience. A gamer, for example, who wants desperately to defeat whatever the game’s current end boss is—at the time of this writing, Ragnaros, though it changes every several months—will not be satisfied, and will not find a real, resonating identity, with a group of gamers who would rather only run raid instances from a year ago which are now “easy to roflstomppwn.” It’s akin setting the goal of eating at Outback Steakhouse but riding with five people who are going to The Olive Garden.

There's no Bloomin' Onion or Ragnaros at the end of the ride.[13] So much of what constitutes gamer identities is wrapped up in the choice of where the gamer "is" or "is going," as different types of things happen in different gaming spaces. A player has to be in the right place, at the right time, to craft the right identity.

**A Looking Glass: Nakamura, Identity Tourism, and Identities at Play**

I chose here to cast these identity formation practices as fitting under the umbrella created by Lisa Nakamura in *Cybertypes* when she coined the term "identity tourism." Identity tourism is:

> …[using] race and gender as amusing prostheses to be donned and shed without "real life" consequences. Like tourists who become convinced that their travels have shown them the real "native" life, these identity tourists often took their virtual experiences as other –gendered and other-raced avatars as some kind of lived truth." (p. 14)

[13] To continue my metaphor, this is not to suggest that gamers are so selfish that one might not be happy with unlimited soup, salad and bread sticks and a raid that kills the Lich King if that's the compromise the group is making that particular day to please someone who needs to kill the breadsticks… er… Lich King. I've abstracted it here to try to illustrate how that person might feel trying, every week, to go to Outback Steakhouse only to end up at the Olive Garden. It's surprising how often raiders, even just from the ones I talked to in this study, will stagnate with a group doing things they don't want to do, all the while hating it and doing a poor job. It breaks the narrative of their in-game identity to the point that they're barely functional, yet they stay in the group.

Nakamura continues, "… the identities users choose say more about what they want than who they are." (p. 54). I wish to make a step away from the specifically racial implications of what Nakamura asserts, so I also refer to when she wrote:

> While these spaces could be categorized as "games" [speaking of MOOs and chat rooms] are also theatrical and discursive spaces where identity is performed, swapped, bought and sold…when users create characters to deploy in these spaces, they are electing to perform versions of themselves… (p. xv)

There is certainly a way in which Nakamura's identity tourism can be read as essentially raced, just as there is a way it can be read as a pessimistic lens for studying online identity, a heuristic where the *Other* is being perpetually marginalized. I do not intend to argue here that race isn't central to Nakamura's work, and I, likewise, see it as an imperative to carefully research race in cyberspace.[14] At the same time, I firmly believe, as a lens, Identity Tourism is a powerful tool for viewing game generated toons (or avatars, or characters) even if the race element is, for the moment, dislocated from being the primary focus. I wish to instead stress two key elements of Nakamura's heuristic:

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[14] One of the other reasons I chose to utilize identity tourism as a lens is because at the outset I hoped there might be, in my study data, more gender, sexuality and race-related information to marry with my other hypotheses. Unfortunately, I did not find enough of that sort of diversity related information for it to be a major factor in my data analysis. The players in my study all play toons that are of their respective gender (the four males, and myself, play male toons, the female participants were both female toons), and while one participant is self-identified Chicana, one is self-identified Mexican-American—and I myself am mixed blood Cherokee—our racial identities do not appear in the research data in any significant or meaningful ways. The fact that there wasn't anything major in terms of discoveries, in spite of racial diversity among the members of my small sample, was perhaps unfortunate but leaves me with a rich area to move into with my next research project(s).

1) The metaphor itself is pitch perfect; across my research, players talk about *WoW* as a place to "get away" from their IRL lives. They are on "vacation" as "others," though I wouldn't stress the capital "O" Other in my own analysis. The game is also awash with lands filled with different virtual races, and travel itself is a key element in the gaming world. If ever there has been a space where a person can vacation as other, games are that place. I can, by holding alt+tab while composing this very document, transport myself from my office to a desert in Tanaris where I, as a tiny goblin decked in blood red armor who just happens to be able to turn into a dragon, dig for relics from an ancient troll empire that (virtual) time has buried in the (virtual) sand.
2) Nakamura very clearly, very eloquently articulates the nature of *performing* identity online; gamers are not specifically equal to their toons, but that performative element – the fact that practices by the gamer author the toon or virtual identity— is currently under-theorized and under-studied, as it is happening in more and more spaces to varying degrees.

Utilizing Nakamura's work in this way—taking the focus away from race and gender and looking instead at the framework of practices of performing identity and crafting an online self—I will later in this chapter analyze the identities and interactions of my participants in a moment where identity clashes brought their specific constructed identities into stark relief.

This, of course, raises the question of what I mean by "identity." Because the word itself can be slippery, I'd like to assert in this study that digital, or more specifically gamer, "identity" is a set of complex characteristics that distinguishes an individual from other individuals, in this case inside the magic circle of the game world. It is that which connotes the

individuality of the gamer and the gamer's toon. It is, to put it perhaps most simply, a persona, the way an individual is known from the outside. And it is something that the gamer/user constructs through his or her practices in game space. At the same time, however, one of the potential shortfalls I see in existing theorizing of the digital identity is that such a premium is placed on the identity forged in the digital space. What I believe scholars must be careful not to ignore is that while the "real life" that supports the digital identity might be obscured from view, it is still present, and it does important work in shaping the gamer's digital identity. In this sense, then, a gamer's digital identity is comprised of fragments of the "real" person , the user, sitting at the keyboard or input device which embed into the gaps in the virtual figure—the toon, the avatar—to create what others see, hear, read and react to the game space. In other words, my goblin Death Knight is, as one might guess, a goblin. He's green, and he's short. He wears elaborate armor that he acquired during his many raids with my participants, evidence of where he's been and what he's done. He charges in first for a fight, throwing clouds of ice at his enemies, has a penchant for yelling "wizzup?" as he attacks things, and he has a rather extensive collection of weapons and clothing, including a set of robes and sword that have no actual value to him as a competitor but which allow him to play "Jedi." And there, finally, at the end, is the evidence of a fragment of Phill, the researcher. There's no reason for my toon to know *Star Wars*, but I do, as do my participants, and the fact that I sometimes wear a set of gear that makes my toon look like a Jedi and "the backward speak I do," is very much a part of my toon's identity, but it exists only because I am just as much of a nerd as my creation and have *Star Wars* toys on the desk where I play. It is from this position that I discuss digital

identity—as a fusion, with the toon being a colorful, rich, but incomplete figure that is made whole with fragments of the user that slide into the gaps.

Issues surrounding digital identity abound in digital scholarship. Perhaps the earliest, most useful digital identity frame was provided by Sherry Turkle (1995) in *Life on the Screen*. Turkle notes that "[a]s players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction" (p. 12). The stress then, as it must be now, lay in the idea of authoring not just a character but a self. Gaming is "like" writing a story for a character, but it also isn't, because the character is also just as much the player as it is not. As Turkle wrote, "[the MUD] 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" (p. 12). Stress here "play," to return to Nakamura's idea of the safety and whimsy of the tourist, while at the same time remembering that these are "aspects of the self," and to that end are never, one might argue, entirely safe to simply play with.

Later in the book Turkle writes:

> When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass. The reconstruction is our cultural work in progress… the complex chains of associations that constitute meaning for each individual lead to no final endpoint or core self… (p. 178)

And here the complexity emerges more clearly than it has before; the game self has no "end point or core self" and its construction is "our cultural work in progress." I realize that to some readers this may seem like an over-sell, but Turkle, over a decade ago, hit on precisely the

tensions I find *WoW* gamers facing today. As Lint once told me, he's clearly not Lint "IRL;" he's not someone who leads a group of raiders to go slay things, he doesn't carry a gigantic mace, and as he pointed out in one of the rare moments where we were speaking about our lives outside *WoW*, the driving force in his IRL world—raising the two children he is the single father to—is an element of his personality that is, by his claim, nowhere to be found in Lint. At the same time, however, traces of that family man do leak into Lint, in his patience in dealing with immature moments from raid members and his tendency to every now and again explain something as if he is speaking not to his fellow gamers but to his three-year-old daughter, saying things like, "And don't step too close to the fire, because it'll burn you and that'll hurt pretty bad."

Turkle is not the only person to make such assertions. In *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee (2003) reflected on his own experience as a gamer to bring issues of identity into his discussion, as he contemplated whether or not he plays the role-playing game *Arcanum* as James Paul Gee, Bead-Bead, or one of three hybrid forms of "James Paul Gee as Bead-Bead" (with emphasis on either his own name, his characters' name, or the "as" between them to indicate different perspectives) (pp. 51-66). Gee's division of identity into a potential triad with two concrete choices (James Paul Gee and Bead-Bead) and the option of the joining action (the playing—in his construction "as") invites a consideration of how factors of each side of the screen, as it were, might bleed together in a holistic consideration of gamer identity, though ultimately I would assert that the only answer Gee could come to is that his third suggestion—with stress on the "as" in the middle—is the

only plausible identity that exists in *Arcanum*. He's not James in that game. And Bead-Bead isn't a James-Free Zone. He's the fusion of both.

In the introduction to their 2007 collection *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century*, Gail Hawisher and Cindy Selfe touch upon the importance of identity play in gaming. They write:

> John and his friends each play a different character in *Final Fantasy XI*, and those characters in a sense represent the boys' personalities while at the same time existing as complete fictions. John likes *Final Fantasy XI* because, as he states, "It's a world that's completely different from what we are pretty much and… you can create and customize your own character, so it's essentially like you have a presence in the world." (p. 12).

Hawisher and Selfe reference Gee in their piece, building from his identity dilemma regarding himself and Bead-Bead in *Arcanum*. The importance here, again, lies in the duality: "real" and a fiction, John but not John. As they write later "John can play as John, but he's also a magician" (p. 13). Once again, John's character is a fusion, a construct that is at once clearly not John but also is composed in part from pieces that are recognizably John.

In his book *Synthetic Worlds*, Edward Castronova takes this sense of identity formation in the gaming world a bit further by considering the implications of entry into the world itself, returning us to the consideration of the magic circle with an idea that might be "identity immigration:"

> Media researchers have argued that their studies show how quickly and easily people can 'become" the objects they manipulate on computers…you go on to click and shape and equip yourself---er this representation of yourself—for as long as you wish to continue playing Dr. Frankenstein. (p. 32)

Of particular importance here is Castronova's "Dr. Frankenstein" metaphor as he describes the creation of an avatar/toon. In Mary Shelley's novel, Dr. Frankenstein is presented as a scientist obsessed with creating new life and tinkering with the parts—substitute here "fragments" from the previous discussion— of the once-living to make a greater whole that in the end represents the doctor's obsession as much as anything else, but as popular culture has all but forgotten, Frankenstein was the creator, not the "monster" he produced. The monster carries the name, as most would think not of a doctor but of a beast upon hearing it uttered. Which leads perfectly into Castronova's next thought:

> When you are satisfied with the body you've created, you have to name it…you realize this place you are going to visit, like Earth itself, has been trammeled by many feet other than your own. There as here, names are important for record-keeping and reputation-building. Each person must have a name, and each name must be unique and unchanging. If millions of people have traversed this terrain, they now occupy millions of names and you cannot have them. (p. 33).

Castronova is the first of the researchers mentioned here to place such primacy on a name, but more importantly he explains why: name=reputation. Name=record keeping. Later in the book, he continues this line of thought:

> … a user who appears in a synthetic world for the first time is a completely unknown quantity to those who are already there. She may happen to be one of the most powerful and proficient wizards in the history of Britannia, but in Norrath she is a nobody. Or she may be a mature, kind, well-spoken professor on Earth, but in Norrath no one knows that and she must develop her kindly reputation again from scratch. (p. 92)

Here Castronova brings in to stark clarity the magic circle, even without directly invoking it. He mentions two fictional worlds and a "real" one. They are loosely connected, but knowledge of identities in each world are providence of those worlds. My participants are "citizens" in some sense of Azeroth. I know them, and they know me, there. Beyond that, what we know of each other is circumstantial and incomplete. And if you ask Flashpoint if they know Phill Alexander, they might look at you funny, but if you ask them if they know my toon, using his name, they'll quickly reply.[15]

**Splitting Skullz: Identity Clashes and Power Struggles**

When studying issues of identity in a group of ten, such as the raid group I researched here, it is important to consider how identities and roles weave into the group as a whole. In the next chapter I will delve much deeper into what this means in terms of a collaborative identity. For now, however, I wish to stick with this consideration: what becomes of a digital

[15] To be fair, I am being a touch cheeky here. My participants do know my real name. Though I will stand behind the belief that they know me better as my toon, whose name, I will remind readers, is not actually "Phill," but using my own name as my pseudonym here seemed to be the cleanest way to keep mention of my toon from being any more confusing than is necessary.

identity when it clashes with how the toon is perceived? In my study it was the moments of dissonance when issues of identity and role came into most stark contrast.

Here I return to an event I mentioned first in chapter 3: the moment when Lint and company left TheSkullz—the guild they were in when I began my research— to start Flashpoint. While a raid group splitting isn't at all atypical in the raiding world[16], the interpersonal problems leading to the split emerged from specific issues related to identity and roles clashing. I believe through understanding what causes a raid group fissure like this one, I can illuminate the importance of harmonious intermingling of digital identities and the need for understandings that while these roles are memetic, they still call for give and take, and the personalities and identities of the people involved matter. The raid has to take place as a practical shared reality, but it's not all about what happens in that shared reality—other factors have dramatic impact. It's not, for example, as simple as saying "we need X player to fill Y role," though from a memetic standpoint that seems logical. This hasn't proven to be the case in practice, and that makes perfect sense: the digital identities of the participants matters, too.

**Taking X-Rays of Skullz to Look for Fractures**

What follows is the story of Sally and Lint, but it's also essentially the story of TheSkullz, at least as a raiding guild. Allow me first to briefly reintroduce the two as players on the field.

[16] Each of the participants in the study had witnessed *at least* one similar guild split before in their previous raiding experiences.

Sally[17] was the guild master; she externally presented as considering this to mean she was the final word on any decision that needed to be made. She would often publically make declarations, such as "No, we aren't going to do that," or "you need to be on at 10 pm if the raid is at 10 pm," but in reality she often consulted with Lint before making these public declarations. She was charming, engaging and highly talkative, described at least twice in my research as being "auctioneer-like." She was not, however, in the opinion of my other participants, particularly talented at the game itself. Publically she presented as knowing exactly what was going on, but in my research interviews she was quick to point out that she didn't "really know" raid encounters and wasn't interested in learning them well enough to teach others. She left that job to Lint.

Lint, meanwhile, was the group's raid leader. "Raid leader" is in itself a peculiar designation, as it is strictly player community created. "Guild Master" is a label that Blizzard and the *WoW* rule set demands exist—someone must be in charge of – create, administer, pay for things for— a guild. But raid leaders are a social construct[18]: groups appoint someone to run

[17] Sally professed to have created the guild for a specific, personal reason: her boyfriend, who was quite good at the game, would not (or could not—she never shared why) speak to people, but he wanted to raid. Sally wanted to make sure he had a place to raid and the ability to obtain gear. Here was someone—in the boyfriend—who would consider himself a bleeding edge raider and who regularly dominated DPS charts, who was for unable or unwilling to communicate with people, and sitting in the room with him, wearing her headset and chatting almost constantly, was his girlfriend, managing a guild and gathering people so the couple could participate in raids.

[18] While raid leader is a socially constructed phenomenon, it was universal across my research sample: every player I spoke to, in every raid each of them had participated in, expressed that there was clearly a raid leader in their groups, even in PuG groups where the person might have

the raid, to call out orders, to understand and explain strategies. TheSkullz raids were Lint's to lead, and when raiding Sally was supposed to, and initially did, take a back seat and simply be a member of the raid group.

This dynamic changed about a month into my research when TheSkullz realized they were stuck at a particular plateau point for three weeks—they couldn't complete the Atramedes encounter which I used to open this chapter. Lint, as raid leader, had a solution in mind. He knew another highly talented player, Iceman, who used to be in TheSkullz but who left to join a hardcore progression guild, a guild which had completed the first raid tier of *Cataclysm* already. Iceman, however, missed his friends, and when Lint asked him for advice on the problems that TheSkullz were having, Iceman expressed a desire to "come back home." So Lint asked Sally if Iceman and a friend could join the guild to help with the raid difficulties, and Sally—again, by Lint's account—expressed no problems with this.

At the same time Sally as GM had decided to try to find a solution to the problem. She recruited Teddy, a Paladin tank; this was a player who provided the exact same roles that Lint played in the raid. When I checked in with Lint the day after this recruiting move, he was furious that Sally recruited a new main tank to replace him, in the raid which he led, without consulting him. He also wasn't happy that she'd brought in other new players she had promised raid spots to, as Lint was not a fan of changing group composition mid-raid and already had a full roster. He also told me that day that Sally had volunteered him to run a second "alt" raid

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only been the raid leader for that one night. It was also universal across my sample that raid leaders—though not guild masters—were never questioned or over-ruled by a guild leader or anyone else, other than in moments of trolling or intense player rage.

run each week on off-days, meaning that Lint would be in charge of leading a three-to-four hour raid five nights a week.[19]

This was the moment where things fell apart. The next week, Lint invited Iceman's friend, Leah, into the guild and there was a slight rumble from a few people in the public guild chat channel. I was, at the time, interviewing someone, so we were both watching the discussion while not actually participating in it. It wasn't terribly specific, but the tension was apparent:

> Sally: Who is that?
>
> Lint: She's a holy priest for the raid group
>
> Sally: The name looks familiar
>
> Lint: It's *gave her real name* from *named the server where she played with Iceman*
>
> Sally: mmmm…

At this point in the discussion, Sally's boyfriend logs in. There's about 5 minutes of public chat silence—Lint would tell me later there was a fight happening between Sally and him in the

[19] Just an aside for readers who might not have a sense of how intense this is: I only raid led once in all my time researching—as a favor to Lint—and it was incredibly stressful compared to just playing, having to account for the other nine people and insure they knew what to do. That aside, the five night raid week, which we ran then and also near the end of my research when the Firelands tier of raiding debuted, is every bit as exhausting as working a part-time job. The first week of Firelands, Flashpoint clocked 43 hours of raid time, and it had an impact on my day-to-day life. I was exhausted from game research. For Sally to just volunteer Lint for twice the work, then, is no small thing. This was a major issue.

officer chat channel, a channel I couldn't see or log. Then they spoke again in the public channel:

> Lint: So if I invite Iceman, is *the boyfriend* going to rage quit or something?
>
> Sally: Iceman can't join the guild.
>
> Lint: But we talked about this…
>
> Sally: No. We'll gkick him if you invite.

Lint then logged out, leaving an in-game status message of "fuck this!" I had not observed—in my month previous—any sort of dissent between Lint and Sally. Particularly in the public guild chat channel, it always presented as Lint staying out of any decisions that weren't raid specific and Sally referring any questions or concerns about raiding to Lint. The two seemed not only "professional" and well aware of their respective roles, but previous to this they'd shown a great deal of comradely and mutual respect.

When I next spoke to Lint, he said:

> You remember that run a few weeks ago? [I did—I actually logged it as a pilot to make sure my methods were working, so I had all of it—numbers, chat, voice, etc.]. Iceman tried to help Sally play better and she rage quit. Apparently [her boyfriend] thinks that Iceman—and me, and you, for that matter—are hitting on Sally when we talk to her in game and on vent, so he went nuts over Iceman offering help.[20] And Sally doesn't like it because she thinks she's better than

[20] I would find out later, though I did not tell Lint, that this was a lie. Sally used her boyfriend in several situations as a scapegoat. It was her own displeasure with Iceman that caused her to

> Iceman. Last week she told me it was fine to bring Iceman back. But now she's saying that [boyfriend] will gkick him, and probably me, if I even invite him. Fuck this, you know? I'm running these raids. I want to play with the people I want to play with. She can't just throw someone in who wants to do my job, and start replacing my regulars, and then tell me I can't make my own moves. It's my group!

He went on explain to me that before I came into the group, Sally had made decisions based on getting gear and achievements for her boyfriend even when it didn't mesh with the rest of the guild's goals, and he told me about how her boyfriend would relay his displeasure to Lint through Sally while raiding if, for example, a dropped item the boyfriend could use was awarded to any other player. Lint also stressed that he'd carefully explained to Sally that he wanted Iceman back because Iceman and Leah knew how to complete the encounter that the group was hung up on.

This was Sally's account, when I inquired as to what happened:

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not want him in the group, and she told me at least once that her boyfriend, in fact, "liked" all of the people in the guild. While this seems like a moment where some discussion could be made of gender roles and gender-based decisions, after the group split Sally ended up being someone I only spoke to twice via email to collect some of my study responses or to randomly check in on because of my concern for her mother, so I will leave this as an important issue to be addressed in another study. I do not wish to over-shadow the months of research I did with Flashpoint by placing too much emphasis on the reactions of a person who was on the opposing side of the guild split and only part of my research for one month, but I do recognize that for many readers, Sally likely raises questions; I plan to address gender issues more specifically in my follow-up study.

> [My boyfriend] hates Iceman after that ICC run. He said he won't play with him. I don't care, I used to like him. If you guys wanted him around it'd be fine. But [my boyfriend] said he'd gkick Lint and his friends if he brings in Iceman. I can't talk to him when he gets like this. I just do what he says.[21]

From the outside, the situation looked grim. On the one side there was a raid leader who'd been undermined and was unable to do what he had planned to do, and on the other side there was a guild master who had made a stand and would have to either back pedal or risk alienating a number of her raiders. The next day, Lint told me that he spoke with Iceman and that they had decided that if Sally wouldn't change her mind they'd just start a new guild and take whoever wanted to go with them.

Lint tried to get Sally to talk to him about a solution that he had come up with: Iceman and Leah would be in the "alt" run with Lint, and Lint would use his other toon—which was also raid ready—with Sally and her boyfriend in the "main" raid group. Sally's response was, "you just want to ditch us!" and she wouldn't explore the idea any further. Lint tried for an entire night to get Sally to talk to him about the situation, and then he quit TheSkullz and started

[21] Again, this read to me, as a researcher, as a major red flag. Had she not told me later that this was a lie, I would have considered a potentially aggressive/abusive relationship to be something that :1) needed to be accounted for in the research and 2) might have been an uncomfortable area of research. Since it turned out to be a lie, I have decided to leave discussion of the gender issues simply in this footnote: had it been real, this would have been a sad commentary on that particular relationship, and relationships like that—in gaming and otherwise—are deserving of more research consideration by our field (not to mention intervention by people who can offer help and protection should it elevate beyond "I do what he tells me").

Flashpoint before going to sleep. The next day, Sally would kick Lint's alt toons, along with the alt toons of everyone who had followed him to the new guild.

Sally told me that she felt like Lint "betrayed her." But She also came clean about a number of things: 1) She had told Lint it was okay to bring in Iceman, 2) it was she who didn't want Iceman around, and she had used her boyfriend as a scapegoat because she knew he wouldn't speak to any of us anyway so we'd never find out she lied, and 3) she had recruited Teddy because she was afraid that Lint had too much "power" in the group and wanted to show him that he "could be easily replaced."

**Say What Now? Roles and Playing**

This exchange in relation to the dilemma faced by TheSkullz and their Atramedes plateau illustrates that the relationships between people in an online game are role-based and complex. For as often as Lint or Sally said "it's just a game," and they both did, often, the data doesn't show anyone involved treating this as low stakes—emotion is present, identity issues are foregrounded. The issues in play here are akin to what one might see occurring in a workplace or in a group of friends: issues of betrayal, people feeling undermined or undervalued, in-fighting over a person's level of skill or capacity to do the job, a desire for power and control, etc. There was also an interesting dynamic of ownership: does Lint own the group if he leads it, or does the guild master own the group? Does the group own the group? And while Lint appeared to be the calmer head, which of his two goals was more important: "I want to play with who I want to play with" or "Iceman can get us past this boss?"

The problem can be fairly easily understood if one looks to gamer roles. While considering a way to define the roles gamers take on, I came upon a quite interesting heuristic in an issue of *Wired*. Chris Anderson (2010), the curator of TED's web collections, offers this definition of an online "crowd:"

> A crowd is simply a community, any group of people with a shared interest…The community needs to contain at least a few people capable of innovation. But not everyone in the community need be. There are plenty of other necessary roles:
>
> - the trend-spotter, who finds a promising innovation early
> - the evangelist, who passionately makes the case for idea x or person y
> - the super-spreader, who broadcasts innovations to the larger group
> - the skeptic, who keeps the conversation honest
> - general participants, who show up, comment honestly, and learn
>
> Different people may occupy these various roles at different times, including that of innovator. Innovation is a response to a particular set of challenges or inspirations. (Anderson, 2010)

Anderson's conception of the crowd works well for his consideration of how video communities (speaking specifically of YouTube in that case) operate in terms or user role. With some slight tweaks, it also serves as an excellent breakdown of the roles of *WoW* gamers as observed in this study. Using his comments as a lead, I developed this:

| World of Warcraft Gaming Crowd/Communities | |
|---|---|
| Name of Role | Work it Does |
| Innovator/ Bleeding Edge Raider | Quite literally innovates. As frontline raiders, these are the people in the *WoW* community who experience content the second it is "live" on the servers (or even before that on the public test realm). They learn the encounters and the maps so that they can lead and inform others. They would be the prime producers of gaming memes in this particular system. |
| Trend-spotter | Almost identical to what Anderson says in the quote above: there are players who are particularly talented at watching specific sources and comparing early theories to see what is the "best" way to do certain things in-game. They don't do the innovating, but they find it and sometimes repackage it into something far better than the innovator's initial product. These would be people responsible for mutation and replication of memes. |
| The Pitch (wo)Man | I don't like the religious undertones of calling this role a "evangelist," but it's the same thing: this is the person who speaks out emphatically and loyally for idea X or person with idea Y. The community might call them "homers" or "fanboys." |
| Memetic Carriers | This is theoretically the same as the super-spreader above, but I wanted to reinforce the genetic terms that surround memetics. These are the people who see the new material and spread it to the masses (the virus, if you will). |
| The Skeptic | This is the person who keeps everyone honest by expressing concerns about the viability of the meme/method. This person could often fly in the face of evidence to speak for something that might end up making him/her an innovator by proposing a better/more functional solution (or even just a parallel solution that works). |
| Typical Raider | This is a person who shows up to play, learns, adapts, rarely innovates or specifically seeks out information to spread, but who executes and shares and takes part in the full process. Every gamer would, in theory, occupy this space at some points. |

Table 5. Gamer Roles (adapted from Anderson, 2011)

These definitions, while incredibly similar to Anderson's originals, emerged organically as definitions for the roles of my participants. Iceman is an Innovator/Bleeding Edge Raider and a trend-spotter, spending much of his time split between the Flashpoint raid group and his other raid group learning encounters and researching to figure out better ways to experience the content. Salty and Leah are both memetic carriers, and Salty often serves as a pitch man for Lint's ideas. I am, myself, a typical raider and skeptic, though due to the methods I used to study here, I became everything on the list at one point or another. The non-participant members of the group—once it stabilized--were all memetic carriers and/or typical raiders.

A careful reader will notice that I didn't include Sally and Lint in my quick summation above. That is because the reasons for their conflict come clear upon reflection upon their gamer roles. As I've implied, Lint is an Innovator/Bleeding Edge Raider. He served as a literacy sponsor for many of the players in TheSkullz and in Flashpoint. Everyone—but Sally, perhaps—saw him as an Innovator and leader. His role was unquestioned by anyone in my data. It was clear what he did, and it was clear that he saw himself the way others saw him in relation to the group. His identity was validated.

Sally was a pitch woman and a typical raider with a bit of a stubborn streak that at times made her the closest thing in my study to a troll, as she would at times refuse to follow direction from Lint or Iceman and had a penchant for ninja log-outs after being told she was doing something wrong. Her boyfriend was a typical raider (or atypical raider, perhaps) who couldn't be more because he wouldn't communicate with the group. TheSkullz all, based on my data, saw the couple precisely this way.

Conflict arises from role confusion on a digital identity level: Lint was what he thought he was, but Sally had a self-image in the digital space—a digital identity—that was hers but wasn't shared or in any way embraced by the others involved; in other words some of these players did a nice job of vacationing as whatever they were vacationing as while others must have booked with the wrong agent. No one I spoke to in the course of my research would debate the classification of Lint as an "innovator" or "bleeding edge" raider. My participants likewise saw the majority of TheSkullz, and later the majority of Flashpoint, as typical raiders and memetic carriers. But the problem came with Sally and her boyfriend. Sally considered herself an innovator and a bleeding edge raider, and while she never really specified when she was and was not including her boyfriend in statements, I think she saw him as one as well. She did not behave as an innovator, though. She resisted learning, she refused to do research, she became inpatient when the group would try to talk through things, etc. She wanted to see quick kills, new gear, and go back to sitting in town chatting with people. She even said, point blank "I'm not going to go watch videos and take notes and stuff. Just pewpew and move on to the next boss." She wasn't willing to be what she said she was.

I would propose, then, that what fragmented TheSkullz wasn't that the group didn't have the right mix of people; the problem was that Sally and her boyfriend were vacationing as something other than what they actually were, and their inability to reconcile their skills and desires with a realistic sense of what was needed for the collective group to proceed led to an impossible moment where the only solution was a split. Sally and her boyfriend either weren't what they were, or they wanted to be what they weren't, and the chasm between "what they were" and "what they thought they were" caused a moment of rupture. It turned what was a

relatively successful collaboration into a fractured tree of different, variable successes and failures as the members migrated to new groups.

Things ended there for TheSkullz, more or less. After the four members "defected" and started Flashpoint with Iceman, tragedy befell Sally—her mother passed away—and she quit devoting hours and hours a day to playing, as she had to take care of family responsibilities. She spoke to me one last time near the end of my research to tell me that she was doing okay, and to tell me that she "wish[ed] I listened Lint's compromise," because Teddy became "a huge pain in the ass douchebag" and sort of ruined things for the guild. Teddy left TheSkullz when Sally's mother passed away, and went on to form a new guild himself. As of the time of my last check-in with him, his new guild had experienced very little success (they were 9/12, but this was a month into the next tier of raiding, of which they were 0/7), though he was happy to be "the boss." Stryfe went with him, though based on periodic checks of my friends list while conducting observations and interviews, he was rarely online. TheSkullz became a social guild, with Sally and her boyfriend rarely online and no one, really, with the aspirations or skillset to raid lead. When I last checked, in August of 2011, TheSkullz roster had shrunken from a high of 70 to 22, and seven of those 22 were Sally and her boyfriend and their alts.

**Conclusion: Digital Identities and Keeping it "Real"**

Throughout this chapter I have made subtle moves back toward Baudrillard and the idea of "real" and what real has come to mean in virtual spaces. This is a moment where I want to focus in specifically on what being "real" means in the gaming world. Take, for example, my participants. Lint isn't any more or less a Paladin than he is *not a Paladin* in the particular moment that he is logged into *WoW* and playing his Paladin. And in that moment, I'm a three

and a half foot tall goblin who hangs out with him, taking field notes and cracking jokes. That is how we know each other, and that is how we interacted over the months of my study. He has seen my face in pictures, but he calls me by my goblin's name, and he makes jokes about the height and appearance of my toon. That's who I "really" am to Lint.

This is a concept I have explored before in relation to gaming roles. As I said in my chapter for *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*—which looks at my experience playing a female character in an all-girl guild alongside my girlfriend—I never *really* lost myself in the idea that I was an elven thief, but there were moments during the experience of playing that blood elf rogue wherein I could sense that I was being read as, and hence started to behave, more stereotypically "female" than I typically do, though I have been told time and time again that I act more female than male in digital space in the first place.[22] In the process of playing with that guild, however, I became accustomed to the simulation I'd created and I answered to the expectations of others. They thought of and reacted to Soren in a certain way; that was who I was when I was with them, regardless of who I was while typing into the keyboard and manipulating the mouse. So while I'd never argue that I was a girl, for all intents and purposes in that space I was more girl than Phill, as I was Soren and not myself.

I asked then and ask now, what was the "real" Soren to the members of her(my) guild? I had not actively deceived them, but I had also willingly allowed my role-playing and their sense of "real" to meld, and they spoke to me first, last, and every time in-between as a young

[22] This assertion was made by my participants in this study as well. Four of them, before hearing my voice, assumed that Phill—the "me" behind the keyboard— was female. I have no idea why, or if it is really a factor in my study, but I find it interesting none-the-less, particularly given that it have written about the same identity misinterpretation before.

woman. They knew things about me—that I was a student, that I lived in Michigan, etc.—but these were viewed through the lens made by my role-play. I was on one sort of vacation, being viewed as being on quite a different sort of vacation, but there was no moment of collision between the "real" Phill Alexander and the real of Soren. They orbited, at best, coming together only when I finally chose to write an account of my (our?) exploits. I am unsure that those who would mark Soren as a dear friend knew Phill Alexander at all, and I'm fairly certain that is okay and that while the circumstances around that particular instance might be extraordinary, the phenomenon of real-on-screen to other players is not.

Therein lies the interesting dilemma: in order for these moments of identity tourism to work, the participants need to find people who essentially share the deception, or to state it in a way that might sound less negative, people who are moving toward the same narrative ends, who are playing the same game in the same way. "Real" in this sense becomes a sliding scale where the most powerful factors are harmony and consistency. Sally wanted to be in charge. She wanted to be seen as powerful and in control. She thought she was one of the best players in the game, on the server, in the guild, and she expected to be treated as such. Lint didn't help her to feel that way, so he didn't work as a part of her narrative reality. She had to manipulate him, or when that didn't work he had to move on, for her to get what she wanted from the experience.

Bear in mind, however, that this entire situation must be understood under the umbrella of "the virtual" being "the real." It wasn't that the physical person, Sally, couldn't live a life in which she worked and socialized with the real person who plays as Lint; these "real" people—

their physical bodies, their biological selves—never encountered each other, nor did they ever see photographs of each other, though they did hear each other's voices in low fidelity VoIP chat. The "reality" where these individuals worked, where the action happened, was the virtual playing field of Azeroth—the magic circle—and the "bodies" that acted and emoted during their time together were a lanky female troll who wore various robes and a Hollywood perfect Blood Elf in shiny armor. They were a mage and a paladin. And while some of their issues are quite "in real life," –issues of power, issues of respect, desire to achieve goals— those issues came to bear within a game set, in virtual space.

In some ways, I am sure this seems like a string of relatively obvious statements I am offering: that identity matters, that the personalities and roles of players matter, that the investment of the player in a toon matters, etc. The complexity can only be seen when stringing it all together into a cohesive whole and looking at what is actually taking place. Here I harken back to where the chapter starts to recall that gaming happens in a "magic circle" of game space: *WoW* is a place, at least in the sense that people inhabit a "body" (a toon) there and convene there for collaborative activities. That space is always already co-authored, as the server and world are sustained by the software and its coders, housed on literal computer servers in various buildings around the world, accessible through the network. But that world is shaped by the players, and more importantly one player attempting to do much of anything within that space will require, as part of the process, other players. In many ways, this mirrors IRL social interaction, as any person who goes anywhere will realize that it is practically impossible to do anything involving society alone (and in the places where one can do things alone it is because the energy/roles/agency of another has been captured by a technology, like

a “U-Scan” cash register system or vending machine removing a server/checker from a transaction).

What is far more interesting, however, is what the presence of digital technology means in this scenario. Theorists have plenty of experience with social interaction between people in physical space, and likewise HCI studies have done numerous studies of how humans interact with various digital technologies. What gaming studies—and my study in particular—offers as the extension is what I hope to see more people doing as they study social media and other online technologies: now it isn’t just studying how the people interact with other people or with machines, it’s looking at how the people shape themselves before and during interactions using the technologies. In other words the seemingly simple statement that it wasn’t the person who plays as Lint disagreeing with the person who plays as Sally isn’t nearly as simple as it looks, because it was Lint disagreeing with Sally, but that disagreement as I pointed out in the narration of their interaction above was about roles and digital identities, about how they’d shaped themselves into the technologies and adopted stances in the game world. That is the critical next step for understanding interactions in online space: accounting for the online space without letting the online space consume/supersede the identities of the individuals. To put that one last way, at the risk of pulling too hard on something that is both simple and intricate, I will simply say this: the gentleman who plays Lint is not Lint, but he is Lint, and Lint is not simply the 3-D model I ran around Azeroth killing dragons alongside. Understanding exactly what Lint is—a conglomeration of a real person’s individual identity, that same person’s crafted identity, and the social roles and identity markers invested into him by the others he collaborates with, what comes into vision is the sort of multi-faceted, robust entity that truly collaborates and

inhabits digital space. As researchers in gaming studies, in computers and writing, in digital rhetoric, and in all fields that do internet research, we need to spend more time meeting and knowing Lints and less time looking at the parts that make up a Lint.

Earlier in this chapter, I drew heavily from James Paul Gee, pointing to his consideration of his game playing identity while playing the game *Arcanum* (is he *James Paul Gee* as Bead-Bead, James Paul Gee as *Bead-Bead*, or James Paul Gee *as* Bead-Bead). It is in part Gee's contemplation that drives me toward my next assertion. In the end, Gee seems most happy with referring to his identity while playing *Arcanum* as "James Paul Gee *as* Bead-Bead," placing the focus on the action of playing, a similar argument to the one I've made above. This is precisely the correct position to assume given Gee's experience: the game is about the play, so the identity is about that play as well. In the next chapter, I will take this assertion a step further by including Gee's idea of the "affinity space" and drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau to look at how raid groups form a communal, group digital identity. Because just as much as I urge researchers to go out and meet more Lints, it's even more critical to understand what ten Lints do when they come together.

## Chapter 5: "Don't be a Double Dotting Douche:" Group Identity in *World of Warcraft*

*Today we find ourselves in a room with a massive creature named Cho'Gall. He lumbers back and forth, slamming a huge mace the size of my toon into our tanks and summoning to his side odd reptilian creatures that periodically emit pulses of dark energy if they aren't interrupted. I'm chasing one of these reptilian "adds" as the tank, a Druid in his bear form, drags the creature away from everyone else to minimize its damage and insure that the small drops of dark blood that come from its corpse cannot reach Cho'Gall.*

*Normally, the tank would backpeddle so that I can keep up, but for some reason today he's chosen to run facing the wall, full speed. I'm losing ground, and losing ground fast, so I have tunnel vision to catch up; I don't take the time to glance over at the group as we rocket past. I can only hear the account of what is happening behind me, and it comes out as a muddled mess of seven voices, most cursing, all louder than their usual. I literally hear (in multiple voices):*

*…Where the fuck INTERRUPT ME, I'M CHAN shit, he's GET BACK IN THE FUCKING GROUP I have to kite out of the DID YOU JUST EAT A SHADOW CRASH? my fuck NOOB Moving backward is not an efficient way to *a bird squawks behind someone, drowning out that voice*…*

*I hit the reptilian. It doesn't emit dark energy. I'm right where I should be. We stop moving. While the cacophony behind me continues, I quickly slay the creature and return to the group. As I'm running back, I see the problem—the once neatly organized group of seven, and*

*their huddled formation, has turned into two people standing where the group once was positioned and five people running around haphazardly from place to place.*

*The voice that had previously just been saying "Interrupt, Phill! Interrupt!" chimes in. It's the bear tank. "It's not like this fucking matters. You're all fucking bads who can't do the DPS to kill this anyway!"*

*The bear tank vanishes. I glance to the raid frame, where everyone's health is displayed in the corner of the screen. Below his name it says "offline."*

*I look up at Cho'Gall, tap my "taunt" button to take aggro, and quickly cycle my defensive cooldowns. I'm roughly the size of Cho'Gall's big toe, and I'm clearly going to die, but I'm going down swinging.*

In the previous chapter, I looked at gamer digital identities and how they function within a raiding guild. The next step in this consideration, and the focal point for this chapter, is how a raid group forms a group identity. I'll utilize the moment where Flashpoint started to see problems, which was also the moment that the group took on its specific sense of collective identity, to illustrate what happens when, to borrow again from Nakamura's metaphor, a few identity tourists lose their luggage, run out of traveler's checks, and decide to go back home. In the process, I hope to illustrate how groups take on identities in digital space.

The argument I put forth here seems, in retrospect, like it should have been something I knew the second I began this project, but it is like so many things in research an obvious, and critical, point that revealed itself to me slowly through the consideration of my research and my data. I pose a simple assertion: raid groups take on a socially constructed collaborative group identity . This bears similarity to the way that members of a team come to think of themselves not as "someone who plays for the Ravens" but "a Raven," or how people who live in a particular place might come to refer to themselves not as "people who happen to live in Michigan" but "Michiganders." It extends deeper, however, because the same factors that weigh so heavily into the consideration of a digital identity in the individual sense shape the collaborative group's identity.

In this chapter I will exhibit this group identity formation and dynamic by detailing the practices of Flashpoint as a raiding group, focusing on moments of discord: when members left, when tensions ran high and anger bubbled over, and also moments when there were no hard feelings but members simply didn't "fit." My assertion that Flashpoint has a group digital

identity hinges on three key factors: 1) the belief that shared goals and shared desires with a shared understanding of roles leads to harmonious interaction (building from the last chapter), 2) the understanding that a guild is a community, even if the space where it communes is a practiced virtual realm and not a truly "physical" space, and 3) that once a group identity forms, it becomes a sort of "simulation" in the Baudrillardian sense, and as such it holds its own truths, values which are held and policed as a function of the existence of the group, that either pull in and welcome people or expel and repel people based solely on whether or not those people are "one of us," but not in a way that is judgmental or harsh, but rather simply because the "simulation"/reality of Flashpoint either is or isn't what a member is or is not. I will begin here, then, by fleshing out some of these ideas to better illustrate what I mean by "community" and how precisely I conceive of the raid group as a cohesive whole that is also a "simulation" or to utilize Benedict Anderson, a scholar I begin this discussion with, an "imagined" community.

Group identity here becomes entangled with another somewhat-sticky term: community. And the critical first step to understanding how a raid group like Flashpoint's takes on a collective group identity is to understand the group as a community. "Community," though, is a contested word, utilized to describe both classrooms and nations, both circles-of-friends and inhabitants of planets. Before "community" can be usefully applied, it needs to be properly constrained.

**Community: Communal, Local, and Practiced**

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (2006) builds a theory of nationalism that utilizes the idea that a nation is not a "real" community but rather, as the title would indicate, an "imagined" one. He defines a nation, and in the process community, as such: -

> …it is an imagined political community - - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign…it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion… is imagined as limited because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet… it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (p. 5-7)

While I realize starting with a theory of nationhood might seem curious here, the very real comparisons one might make between the users in an enormous digital social network (like a game) and a nation are substantial (a shared sense of sameness, the fact that people accept that there is a community when they cannot physically see each other, etc.). As such, several of Anderson's distinctions here serve as powerful tools to begin shaping a "community" heuristic. Communities—even the imagined communities of Anderson's nation—have limits. When Anderson speaks of this larger construct, the nation, he specifies that it *must* be imaginary, in

that people have to grant as "real" something that cannot be real to them, at least in an empirical sense, but the nation is made real by the shared understanding of boundaries and a concept—however elastic or abstract—of sameness.

I am, of course, less concerned with the imaginary written large community of a nation, at least in the context of this particular study, other than the obvious comparison between a "nation" in Anderson's conception and the idea that the 11.5 million players of *WoW* are a "community." What is instead important to me is what Anderson believes is "imagined" to exist across that large sample, wherein he explains what is truly, in his estimation, a community: "deep, horizontal comradeship," "fraternity [sic]," and "[a] willing[ness] to die for," something that is "limited" with "finite, if elastic, boundaries." Borrowing from Anderson's nation-as-community, then, I make the following claims about community itself: 1) a "real," practiced, lived community cannot be bigger than the participants can see/know (to be larger would be to become imaginary) and 2) a community is based on a sense of comradery and shared experience, and 3) community must have boundaries, though those might be highly elastic and will most certainly change over time.

To contrast Anderson's "nation" in a more game-centric way, in "Affinity spaces: From *Age of Mythology* to today's schools," James Gee (2007) suggests that games take place in something he labels an "affinity space:"

> if we start by talking about spaces, rather than "communities," we can then go on and ask to what extent the people interacting within a space, or some subgroup of them, do or do not actually form a community. (Gee, 2007, p. 89)

Gee, then, wishes to look at shared activities in games as happening in units of "space," without the idea of membership in a group or belonging to a community being critical to game activity. Gee begs an interesting question: how does one go about determining what is an online "community" and who is part of that "community" once it exists? Gee pushes against the idea that an imagined community of gamers exists, casting the shared inhabitation of game space as being potentially, at least in some cases, happenstance.

In one sense I agree completely with Gee. Azeroth stated large, the "world" *of Warcraft*, is not a community any more than one could call the total of Facebook users, all the members of Match.com, or everyone on a mailing list like the They Might Be Giants fans listserv a "community." The definition of "affinity space," or as Gee says in the quote above "people interacting in a space" who share some common thread, be that playing *WoW*, liking Facebook, seeking to date someone, liking a specific band, seems much more fitting. These groupings/collectives would have to be defined as "imagined" communities, and the idea that the members of these groups feel any real connections to a greater whole would be based on belief in a whole and not on actual interactions with everyone in the group.

In fact "affinity space" is an accurate way to describe even the individual cities on a particular *WoW* server. There is nothing to inherently unify the people who happen to be in Orgrimmar, the capital city for the Orc race, other than the fact that they all happen to be playing the game and are in that particular space. One need not proclaim any sort of "Orcness" to enter the city, and there are a whole slew of things a person might do—visiting a profession trainer to "level up" a skill, buying or selling goods, arranging travel to another location—that

involve only NPCs. It would be difficult to claim that Orgimmar, even on one of the smallest servers where the population of Horde players might only be in the thousands, is a community.

But the idea of place/space and community becomes slightly more complicated for study of a game like *WoW* when looking at the dungeon/raid interface. Dungeons and raids are referred to in game as "instances." Taken from the open-source user-generated reference WoWWiki (2011):

> Dungeons, keeps, and other confined areas can have sub-areas called *instances* (aka instance dungeons). These *instances* are special areas in the *World of Warcraft* where your group or raid party is able to interact with a dungeon privately; that is, without interference from other parties or raids… The term instance has been often conflated and interchanged with the term dungeon.

Instances, to take the *WoWWiki* definition just a step further, appear to the gamer to be fluid transitions through doors in their gaming world on their server, but in reality happen on different servers in what might be imagined as a pocket universe. It is quite literally an "instance" of the raid; if the ten member Flashpoint raid group goes into Blackwing Descent, they are not in THE Blackwing Descent for their server; in fact, paradoxically, there really is no Blackwing Descent on their server. There's just a portal to enter Blackwing Descent which moves those ten players to an iteration (an instance) of Blackwing Descent on a different physical server in Blizzard's system.

The result of entering a raid instance is that contains just the raid members, so the group of in the case of my research ten--but sometimes ten, twenty-five or forty—is set away from the rest of the gaming world. There is an important difference in this raid group, in the

raid instance, vs. the other space/places in game: all of the raiders in a raid instance have chosen to participate in the raid and to commune with the other players involved.

I assert that in game-spaces, community is a practiced thing: community is composed of shared goals, desires, and styles of play, including elements of friendship/comradery as well as issues of communal "need," something I will touch on a bit later in this chapter. In this sense, a guild is, essentially, a community. A raid group is, again, a community. Due to the differences in how geographical/physical space must be considered in virtual worlds, I will not say that the participants replace the "space" entirely, but rather that the participants in a gaming community create and maintain the space, as guilds and raid groups are the result of kairotic actions and sustaining practices; the time/space must be right for the community to exist, but beyond that moment, the community's continued existence depends upon the actions of its members.

**Cities that Are(n't) Communities or Truths, Fictions and a Fictional Truth**

Community remains an elastic term. I have no doubt that some would consider the whole of *WoW* players to be a community, while others might not make such a wide interpretation but would never-the-less consider the virtual city of Orgrimmar that I mentioned in the previous section to be a community. I am not attempting to split hairs here, but another key element of a gaming "community" comes clear when Richard Smith and Pamela Curtain (1998) write about gamers in "Children, Computers and Life Online: Education in a Cyber-world." Their chapter builds around the idea of gamers taking on the "Cyberpunk" identity, one who is "cyber=fusion of flesh and machine tech; punk=rebellion against social norms" (p. 213). Smith and Curtain are the first scholars to directly tackle the concept of video gamers forming

"symbolic communities" (p. 214), noting that video games and the communities that their players form spawn jargon, styles, and attitudes which serve as the building blocks for identity in those spaces. In other words, gaming communities spawn a sort of culture.

What I am interested in here, as I look at game communities, is that sense of group belonging and communal identity that emerges from what Smith and Curtain note: the jargon, styles, and attitudes that build a communal culture.

Of course for jargon, styles and attitudes to build community, they need to be practiced and replicated. In considering how this sense of practice relates to building community, I turn to "Walking in the City," where Michel de Certeau wrote:

> … New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding… (p. 157)

Here, de Certeau builds a concept of "city" which is based on a contemporaneous sense of use and practice. A few pages later he elaborates the three things that "construct" this city:

> The 'city' founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse is defined by the possibility of a threefold operation. First, the production of its own space (un espace propre): rational organization must thus repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it; Second, the substitution of a nowhen, or of a synchronic system, for the indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions; univocal scientific strategies, made possible by

> the flattening out of all the data in a plane projection, must replace the tactics of users who take advantage of 'opportunities' and who, through these trap-events, these lapses in visibility, reproduce the opacities of history everywhere;
>
> Third and finally, the creation of a universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself: it gradually becomes possible to attribute to it, as to its political model, Hobbes's State, all the functions and predicates that were previously scattered and assigned to many different real subjects - groups, associations, or individuals. (p. 159)

So within de Certeau's system, a "city" (a space with an active community) is based on the production of its own space, though that space could be imaginary, as it is self-defined, the production of a synchronic system (having a history and a contemporary moment—existence in time/space), and it needs to have a "thingness" that creates a "groupness." I know that de Certeau is speaking of a geographical place—of a physical city that consists of streets and buildings and land and has people that live within it, but conceptually, what he is describing is actually a system that builds itself, a practiced network. I believe this is what successful *WoW* groups do. They construct themselves through repeated and modified actions within a constrained space. There is no physical realm for the group, therefore there is no literal, concrete-brick-and-mortar city, but their practices transform the obvious fiction of Azeroth, its bits and pixels, into a living, breathing community, even if that community only has its own distinct space when the members of the community enter an "instance" and generate their own unique space.

What I suggest here, then, is that a raiding group exists as a community in the same way that the city does in de Certeau's essay. New York—de Certeau's example—exists because people inhabit and practice it. It exists through use. A raid group, and a guild, within a game, likewise exist only through use; their simple presence in the game world doesn't make them, or the space, a community. If a goblin Death Knight falls in the Swamp of Sorrows and no one is there to listen, he doesn't make a sound because I play with *WoW*'s sound turned off. But if Salty is there fishing next to him, it's a total "roflcopter" that I fell, and believe me, everyone in the community will be told.

This sense that community-and-guild-exists-as-practice is typified by Flashpoint. The guild is unique in that every group is unique, a collection of real individuals with real goals. But it's also shockingly similar to a great number of just-under-the-top-tier raiding guilds in the ways that it operates (raiding at set times, participating in the same encounters in the same order, utilizing many of the same strategies, etc.) and in that it has the same basic mix of toon classes and skills. There are roles—memetic roles—that each person has to play. There are goals that are shared by a host of other groups. There is a mentality that is shared. It is the melding of that which makes Flashpoint unique and that which makes it similar to so many other guilds that ultimately leads to success. Everyone in Flashpoint knows and understands what the guild is about and what the guild wants, and their communal practices lead to guild success.

**Raging Bears, Double-Dotting Douches and a New Couple**

Flashpoint started as a model for success. During their first raid week—which I discussed in Chapter 1—they went 11/12 of the first tier of *Cataclysm* raid content, only failing to complete the last boss because there wasn't enough time in their compressed raid schedule.

With the core members having just left TheSkullz, the group meshed well and functioned as a cohesive collective. While spirits were high, Lint told the group, repeatedly, not to expect the same success every single week.

He would end up being prophetic. That first week, Flashpoint had to pick up—or PuG—two people who were highly talented friends of the eight core members. When the guild found regulars to fill those last two spots the next week, the overall group damage done, and the ability to kill things, went down. It didn't seem significant, at first, but when Flashpoint next pulled Cho'Gall, the final boss of Bastion of Twilight (the eleventh in 11/12), this damage problem reared its ugly head. The week before the DPS players had been so stellar that the adds—the other mobs that Cho'Gall summons to essentially distract players and debuff their abilities—were no problem. They died quickly and quietly. It was a perfect memetic replication of what the fight should be, moving like a well-oiled ten person machine.

With two new people, those same adds died slowly and in some cases not at all. The strategy that called for eight people in a tight group with one tank that kited an add and a DPS who followed that tank to kill the add before returning to the tight group— the memetic method of killing the boss that the group had learned and practiced before— turned into a tank standing where he should, a tank kiting, a DPS following the kiting tank, and six people milling around in some sort of odd gyrating cloud around Iceman. As a result, the guild failed at the encounter fifteen times in two hours and quit for the night. Then they came back two nights later and wiped twenty-three times in a little over three hours, then quit. Then they tried it the next week and wiped ten times in a little over an hour and quit, and tried two days after that,

and I think the pattern is coming clear. Cho'Gall wouldn't die again. He had Flashpoint's number. For a month, Cho'Gall stood in the way of the guild, even after they managed to kill Nefarian, the last boss of the tier, and move to 12/12.

It was after a month of these wipes that the evening from my chapter opening anecdote happened. The bear tank there, who I will refer to here as TheBearTank because he wasn't a participant in my study, was, as Iceman described him to me aptly: "A little fucking ray of sunshine. Really, he's just a douche. Him and the boomkin—that double-dotting douche. They're assholes. But they're good." The Boomkin Iceman refers to here was TheBearTank's best friend, and the two of them had come to Flashpoint to have "another" place to raid and presumably to relax. Flashpoint—though highly successful—billed itself as a casual raiding group, and that vibe wasn't shared by TheBearTank and his friend. These two wanted to push for server rank one.

Though he wasn't a participant in my study, I knew TheBearTank well because I was the DPS who always followed him on those Cho'Gall pulls, and as such he and I spent that encounter in constant contact, talking about the fight while he vented his frustrations. We spoke quite frequently during that month of failed attempts. He had a low opinion of everyone in the group but his friend and Iceman, and he never really held that back. He was, I would assert, not interested in being friends with, or collaborating with, the group as a whole. His sense of why he was in the group didn't mesh with what the group as a whole desired.

TheBearTank's reaction, and his leaving, serves as a second example of the role confusion that I pointed out in the previous chapter with Sally, but it further shows how the

identity of the individual can contradict the identity of the group and compromise the community. Iceman invited TheBearTank and his friend to join Flashpoint under the impression that they were going to just be raiders and take instruction/help out and have fun. They both had all the gear they could possibly want already, knew the fights, and were solid players who weren't apt to make mistakes, so they seemed like "ideal candidates," as Iceman would say, in spite of TheBearTank being "a little high strung." But the two of them weren't there to lead or to innovate. They were there to relax and let Iceman and Lint run the show. That wasn't how TheBearTank and his friend saw themselves. They believed they were the two best players in the group—and maybe they were—but they also felt like if they wanted to do things their way, it was fine. Everyone else should adapt to their innovative leads.

**Things Get Aggro-vating: The Technical Results of Community Distress**

TheBearTank holding the opinion that Flashpoint should bend to the desires of he and his friend's whims would lead to two problems for the community. Both have to do with "aggro," which I explained earlier as a tank's ability to keep the attention of a mob so it doesn't attack other people. It is critical in a raid environment that the main tank of the group—for Flashpoint, that was almost always Lint—be able to control aggro so that he or she can maneuver the enemy unit(s) and keep the entire memetic process of engaging in the encounter flowing correctly.

The first problem was that because TheBearTank considered himself better than Lint, he would randomly taunt things off of Lint so that he, TheBearTank, had aggro and hence "something to do." This, in itself, isn't a problem. The problem is that there is specifically a

"main" tank and an "off" tank because they have specific roles and a need to work together to control aggro and direct encounters. If the off-tank is trying to do the main-tank's job, it's a problem. For a more technical explanation of exactly what this means, see sidebar. The quick and short version is this: someone taunting who shouldn't be taunting turns well organized encounters into random, twitchy messes where no one is certain what to do/what to hit/where to stand.

**An Aside: Aggro Issues with TheBearTank**

During my research, I cataloged the threat issues that emerged from TheBearTank constantly taunting mobs away from Lint. It wouldn't have been a problem if he had occasionally taunted off—be that accidentally or on purpose. But when it became a regular practice, it became a problem for the entire group.

On reason is that bear tanks have a major weakness vs. Paladin tanks: they only really have one taunt—a quick move to recover aggro—whereas Paladins have two and a situational third. This is compounded by another problem: aggro builds from the very first attack on an enemy. So if, for example, Lint pulls something by hitting it, then he hits it three or four more times and uses his taunts, he gains significant aggro (in game terms, around 300,000 threat-per-second or TPS). That's sufficient to hold all but the most over-geared DPS from being able to pull, as DPS tends to top out at around 280,000 TPS[23]. If a second tank taunts, though, the threat initially spikes for the new tank, so for a split second that tank will have, for example, 330,000 TPS. Then it

[23] My Death Knight DPS, going all out, generates around 150,000 TPS and Iceman's mage 280,000, and this was when each of us made a concerted effort to pull for the sake of figuring out the numbers on *Omen*, the *WoW* in-game threat monitor add-on.

drops to whatever that second tank had built up (typically right around 140,000-200,000) because the initial tank's threat has faded away, going back to essentially zero, though it bounces on the first strike and appears to only drop to around 100,000. TheBearTank's TPS, one second after taunting, would be at maximum 250,000, and was sometimes as low as 110,000.[24] A quick look at the numbers shows the problem; a DPS couldn't pull aggro from Lint even if he or she had their very best outgoing attacks up, but until TheBearTank could build threat, a DPS could rip aggro away from him, at which point both tanks would have to out-threat-generate a DPS to get control over the mob again, not to mention that if Lint was the one taunting back he'd soon be contending with the other tank, again, too, essentially threat juggling for entire encounters. IF a DPS pulled aggro in this process of this "battle" between the two tanks for threat, he or she was likely to die. Only the actual tanks can take multiple boss hits in these encounters. The early Flashpoint pulls were plagued with situations where TheBearTank's taunting led to someone dying for no reason other than aggro problems, followed by a curse-laden insult from TheBearTank about how "fail" the person who pulled aggro was.

The second problem was TheBearTank's friend "double dotting." This is a practice that elite players—or as Iceman put it, "number hogs"—use to increase their damage done. When facing multiple targets, in many cases the DPS are supposed to focus on whatever target the tank is attacking so as to not fragment aggro (a practice called "focused firing"), as the tank can hold multiple targets, but tank aggro is highest on the target being directly attacked by the tank and cascades down to the other mobs in a respective group or "pull." A double-dotting DPS will

[24] All these numbers are from the *Omen* add-on, rounded for textual neatness so I didn't end up with things like 101,232.4231

place his damage over time attacks—spells cast that do initial damage then damage every X seconds for Y period of time— on the tank's target and other targets as well, sometimes up to three or four. This often pulls aggro from the tank's secondary targets, which means the tank has to switch his focus to those mobs to taunt them back, which leaves his initial target—the thing being attacked by everything but the extra dots—without aggro generation and hence in prime position to be pulled away by another DPS exceeding his threat. This can lead to a mess wherein the tank is switching targets and taunting as fast as possible but cannot regain aggro over everything in the pull. Most players don't double dot when a tank is facing aggro issues, but TheBearTank's friend was only concerned with doing more damage, so he often double dotted even knowing that it could lead to catastrophe. Coupled with TheBearTank's taunt offs, the two of them created a fragmented aggro mess for Flashpoint and impeded their ability to complete encounters.

The night of TheBearTank's rage-quit during the Cho'Gall encounter—my introduction to this chapter—TheBearTank and his friend not only logged off without saying a word but also quit the guild, and without talking to anyone other than a quick insult to Iceman, transferred to a different server. Initially Iceman was distraught, as this meant that not only did the guild lose two regulars but would need a new tank, a role that is often difficult to fill. But Iceman found replacements in the form of a married couple who both played druids, who I will refer to as Tim and Cat. They joined the guild, with Tim taking over for TheBearTank and Cat filling the final roster spot.

The week these two new recruits participated for the first time, Flashpoint beat Cho'Gall in three attempts—all of which were Tim's first attempts at the encounter. The next week the guild beat their first heroic—or "hard mode"—boss. A week after that Flashpoint defeated a second heroic mode boss, and progression resumed. Tim wasn't as well geared as TheBearTank, nor was he as familiar with the fights. And Cat didn't do quite the damage that Double-Dotter did. But when everyone understood their respective roles and worked for the good of the group, success was met with "lesser" players.

**When We are like Me and is Like We and We all Raid Together**

In Flashpoint, I believe I've witnessed and documented an example of a group digital identity. Their "reality" was that of a casual raiding guild focusing on getting better and having fun, bearing in mind the desires of each individual but never putting the needs of one or another over the needs of the group. That is not to invoke Marx or to claim that guilds practice communism or socialism, but instead I wish to stress that the same sort of terminology applies to a guild—or at least, most certainly, this guild— in earnest. Goals were set and strategies made to meet them, and everyone carried his or her weight. I jokingly once said "from each according to his leetness, to each according to our pwnage" when asking Iceman how he'd characterize the group dynamic, and after pausing, and recognizing my source material, he said "well, yeah. As long as you don't suck."

A final element that isn't in the foreground but must also be considered is the issue of "need" in the communal practices of a guild/community. When I asked Lint what he felt Flashpoint was, he said:

> [Flashpoint] is a collection of individuals who all play a game and for the most part tolerate one another so they raid, or in other words the part of the game they enjoy and can't do alone. [Flashpoint] grew out of friendships and an inability to enjoy the game the way we all wanted to. Certain people have been around, and in some cases still are, through necessity. By and large however most I would consider are friendly and while everyone may not be "friends," there aren't many people who are around simply because they are required. If I feel someone is getting in the way of everyone enjoying their time, then that's when issues need to be addressed.

What Lint touches on here is a less idyllic view of community, something I believe has been present in the discussion but that so many have spoken around: the concept of necessity. Most specifically, communities often "need" specific things, and in most communities, some members adhere simply because they fulfill a communal need. In a guild, these sorts of people aren't viewed as a problem, but as can be seen from what Lint says, they're not "preferred." In the case of Flashpoint, eventually all of the "of need" members either became a part of the social network of the guild or moved on and were replaced by members who were a better fit, but I believe this is atypical; based on the other raid groups I've seen, and what members of Flashpoint have said about previous experiences, there tend to be people who are there because they are needed and they, in turn, need the rest of the group to be able to raid.

It is that sense of group identity—that everyone do his or her part, have fun, and that some might be present due to individual and group needs—that contributed to, and was then

galvanized by, the events with TheSkullz in the last chapter. But when TheBearTank and his friend didn't want to be a part of the Flashpoint group, and instead chose to try to push for elite status and seek out individual numbers and individual satisfaction, the guild became an uncomfortable reality for them and they, in turn, made everyone else uncomfortable. In many senses, it became about what was sustainable and what wasn't, with the raid member's desires and needs establishing the ad hoc rules of how raid time would be spent. Much in the way that Stuart Selber and Johndan Johnson-Eilola (1996) noted that message board communities often self-police, the guild without any overt action self-policed—or rather self-expelled— those two members, with the actions of the collective seeming to bubble around TheBearTank and his friend the way the immune system might attack a foreign body.

I realize that metaphor might seem strained, but bear (no pun intended) with it for a moment. As a part of my research I cataloged every raid group interaction between my participants and TheBearTank, as well as a number of discussions during raid preparation and while just otherwise killing time in game. He was, as I mentioned before, often quite displeased and would say judgmental and less-than-constructive things about other raid members, but looking back, no one from Flashpoint ever said anything negative or judgmental to him or to his friend. They were never blamed for the group's failures, even though my data clearly illustrates the aggro problems that Iceman and Lint knew existed, and a participant would have had to have been blind and deaf to not notice the hostility from TheBearTank and Dotter. No one even "barked" back when TheBearTank would refer to someone as "you fucking fail ass noob" or "you waste-of-15-dollars-piece-of-shit." He was always treated with respect, was never asked to sit on "the bench" so someone else could participate, was never denied any item that

dropped or otherwise treated poorly. If anything, the group seemed to make an effort to make him feel better.

And still, the result was that he "went nuclear" as Iceman would say, logged off in a huff, and vanished. The same thing happened with other members during my time following the group: there was the hunter who could only make it to one hour of each raid but was still invited promptly and awarded more loot than others to try to keep her "on par, gear wise" with people who raided the full time each night—she stayed for two months then decided that it "sucked;" There was the warlock who spent two hours every raid night talking about how he'd do something the group did the same way every week differently/better, was given the chance every week, and finally, after failing at it for a fourth time, in spite of the group's complete patience with him, rage quit; there was the warrior who desperately wanted new weapons, who the guild got new weapons for, who then blamed his not being "used" to the new weapons for his performance and never logged in again; there was the priest who said over and over "please tell me if I do something wrong," who then told me one night, seemingly crying, that he couldn't take being "called out for doing that wrong" and left the group; and most recently there was the guy who claimed his other guild, which we found out later didn't exist, was so much better that running with Flashpoint was "below him," but who showed up every week right on time and ran the full session until he finally came up against a fight he couldn't master then left to go back to his "elite" fictional other guild. I was positive, as I looked back at my data, that my memory must be somehow flawed from my own participation, and that I must have missed the points where the group alienated these members. But those moments simply do not exist.

What does exist, in each case, is the discussion of why each of those people didn't fit, discussions that are matter-of-fact and don't pass any more judgment than I did in my descriptions of those participants above. I feel almost as if I'm valorizing Flashpoint in saying this, but there just isn't any evidence of anger toward these players: not during their time with the group, not about the ways that they left, and not afterward. But there is a direct acknowledgment that each of these players did not fit, and often Iceman, at least, showed surprise at how long some of them lasted.

This leads me to reiterate an assertion I made a few paragraphs ago: Flashpoint had (has) a group digital identity. Some players, even when welcomed and treated well, made fully aware of the group's goals and allowed to see how everyone behaved, couldn't fit into that identity due to their desire for other things or to behave in other ways. I wouldn't argue that Flashpoint's identity is fixed; I can chart ways in which it changed, and I will discuss those at length in the next chapter, but its identity had (has) agency and a certain core portion of it—the part that emerged from theSkullz and bloomed into its own "thing"— held together through practices and what one might call traditions but what I will, again, refer to as memes. If it's Tuesday and it's 10:50 pm server time, Salty's cooking up fish, there's a tiny DK preparing to cast a teleport spell, and Iceman is trying to corral the ten people who will be starting the raid into a single channel on the Ventrilo server. Lint and the new bear tank are both tucking in children and will come back, each with coffee, with some interesting anecdote about the last thing a son or daughter said before daddy headed to raid. Leah is picking one of many reasons to remind our resident Role-Player that he's a total nerd, and the member of the guild who was relocated to Germany is sharing accounts of a morning news broadcast in a language he doesn't

speak while eating Cherrios. In ten minutes, those people will be of a single mind, executing meme after meme, going encounter by encounter through a raid instance. And that's the way it is. That's what Flashpoint is. It's the interesting blob made by coffee, awkward role-play, jovial horseplay, Charlie Brown's Teacher voiced news, digital fish fry, kids saying the darndest things, the frenetic chaos of organizing, and the calm, relaxed execution of yet another week of well-practiced, well mimicked digital dragonslaughter.

**But Wait… What about That Bear and the Dots?**

Based on my research, I would argue that there's a bit of a black box to the whole "not really meant for Flashpoint" self-policing phenomenon, but I also know that making such a claim could appear to not illustrate proper scrutiny of the what actually happened. Allow me to cast things another way.

Maybe, to borrow from the classic relationship cliché, it's not Flashpoint, it's "you." TheBearTank and his pal the Double-Dotter needed to be the best of the best in their group, they needed success with little effort, and they needed, as judgmental as it sounds, to as Iceman said "have their asses kissed all the damn time." Neither of them would deny this to be true, and they both, in fact, were quite forceful about the "we're the best" part of it. Perhaps they weren't interested in being in a casual group where the raid might all go kill something that it is only killing because one member of the group wants the dragon mount that might drop from it and the other nine think that's a great idea for the night. It's entirely possible that they weren't willing to accept that the guild might all die on a boss encounter because Lint's

son woke up from a nightmare and he had to step away from the computer. Their desires didn't fit that narrative. So they had to move on and find what they were after.

Other than the snippets of hateful dialogue during Cho'Gall pulls, I never really got TheBearTank's side of the story. After my research had basically concluded, though, he came looking for me, a moment that as a researcher I found fascinating but as a player, knowing his low opinion of me, I was slightly terrified by. It turned out he had spoken at length with Iceman, and there were a number of issues he was facing—issues I don't feel comfortable sharing as he wasn't a participant in my study, other than to say I completely and totally understand how a person could have serious outside-of-game problems that would overpower their gaming lives. Iceman mentioned that a number of Flashpoint's raiders hadn't understood why TheBearTank stormed off, so he—in all his BearTankness—wanted to come and give me what I thought was an apology but Iceman felt didn't really make up for TheBearTank's behavior. One thing he shared, though, helps to put my data in perspective. He said, "look, I know you guys kill shit, and you're kicking some serious ass over there, but I have no fucking idea how. I don't get what it is you're [here I am quite certain he means the whole guild] doing. I mean I watch you [here I think he meant me specifically] and I just think there's no way, then you're at the top of the DPS and the thing is dead. It never made sense to me."

TheBearTank, in the end, didn't understand. This is where I think what I said to Iceman surprised him. I told him I completely understood, and even though TheBearTank had, at one

point, rather savagely attacked me, and said worse still about me[25] to Iceman, I held him no ill will. TheBearTank didn't "get" Flashpoint. And perhaps I only feel like I do because I spent so much time watching them (watching us?) and paying such close attention to their (to our?) interactions, but in that moment, talking to Iceman, I could see how a failure to grasp how the guild operated would lead to intense frustration and ultimately alienation. So I told TheBearTank it was okay, and we never spoke again.

**Conclusion: We Are…**

In concluding this chapter, I wanted to be able to assert with certainty that I'd established that there is such a thing as group digital identity. The results I have, though, beg for additional research. In this case, as this raid group was observed, it appeared to form a community with an identity—two things I firmly believe are intertwined. This is, of course, but one case, and therein lies the problem with making any dramatic assertions. What one raid group does might not be what another does.

I also find myself still slightly puzzled, in spite of my numerous times reviewing the data and considering the contexts, to determine exactly *how* Flashpoint self-policed. It is clear to me, and I hope clear to you as readers, that they did, and the group had a distinct "groupness," and I hope it is even clear that those who didn't fit where shown that they didn't fit/weeded out. This was clearly a function of the raid's group identity, though the specific mechanism is difficult to isolate. The action which repelled those who were ill fits/were not truly parts of the

[25] Myself and other guild members. I self-identify here because the conversation with Iceman was specifically about me and TheBearTank. As a raid leader, Iceman felt he owed it to me to get TheBearTank to apologize for attacking my character.

community seems to be obscured from view, or at least obscured from the tools of this particular research project. And an "it does" without a "how" it does it feels at least partially hollow. In future research, I hope to devise a way to root out this particular mechanism while also seeing if other groups behave in the same way.

What I can safely reiterate is that Flashpoint does have a digital group identity—a sense of community—based on precisely the things I enumerate earlier in this chapter. I asserted, based on the work of Benedict Anderson, that a community, and hence a cohesive raid group with a group identity, must 1) not be bigger than the participants can see and experience and 2) must be based on a sense of comradery or shared experience. I added to this an assertion from Smith and Curtain, that game communities foster jargon, styles and attitudes that build a communal culture. I finished my construction of a community by utilizing the three ideas from de Certeau's "Walking in the City:" 1) that a community is based on the production of its own space, 2) the production of a synchronic system (having a history and existence in time/space), and 3) that it needs to have a "thingness" to generate "groupness." Taken as a whole, then, a raiding game community, and hence a raid group digital identity, depend on the following five criteria:

1) Finite membership—everyone needs to know everyone, at least to some degree. This does not indicate that there must be, for example, fourteen equal "friendships" or "relationships" in a raid group of fourteen, but each member needs to know of, have worked with, and have seen the other thirteen members.

2) There must be “comradery” or a sense of shared experience, one that might border on being labeled a “culture”—consisting of jargon, traditions, styles, attitudes and shared history
3) It needs to generate and maintain its own space, a space maintained by practices (in this case, by the memetic practices I’ve discussed in the last several chapters). I remind readers here of the instance as a sort of “concrete” representation of the space a guild creates and maintains through practice.
4) It needs to be the product of activities in a moment in time as well, or to lean on another term that I will utilize heavily in the final chapter, these communities and identities are contingent upon a kairotic moment—there was a time and a place for the specific group to flash (slight pun intended) into existence.
5) There needs to be a “thingness” or “groupness”—in other words, for there to be a group digital identity, the group has to have a sense of itself as existing. I realize that might seem, upon first reading, paradoxical; a thing can only exist if it thinks of itself as a thing—I realize I sound a bit like Descartes playfully proclaiming that “I think, therefore I am,” but it’s the important step from people in one of Gee’s affinity spaces to a group with group identity. If I, for example, just happen to be standing next to someone at McDonalds, and we both order food, we are not having dinner communally, we are not a dinner party. But if I meet someone at McDonalds and we order together, sit together, and dine together, we had for that time/space moment a dinner meeting and were dining as a party. Just doing the same thing in the same space isn’t enough to be a group or a community. It lacks a group motive.

Utilizing these five criteria as a heuristic, it's easy to see the differences for the members of the Flashpoint raid group while inside TheSkullz guild, once they broke out with TheBearTank and Dotter, and after that duo left and the group became essentially harmonious. Point one might have been true even for TheSkullz, though the amount of distrust among members might have led to deception and a sense of not really knowing the others well. There certainly wasn't a sense of groupness fostered in TheSkullz, or in the total of the Flashpoint group with TheBearTank. Each did begin by adhering to point three, but that I am willing to grant that World of Warcraft, in this context, does a great deal to foster this point by literally generating a space with goals and dropping a raid group into it; it is when people do not engage in practicing the actions of raiding that this point falls apart. Point four builds on this with timing, something that certainly was disadvantageous for TheSkullz and for TheBearTank and his friend, but which Flashpoint in general illustrates well. And finally comes the sort of culmination of the whole thought process: is there a "groupness?" There was for Flashpoint, but there was not for TheSkullz, and the result was one group with an identity and another with a murky mess of presumed identities that were overpowered by the identities of its participating members.

It is at this point that I circle back to Baudrillard, perhaps the most muddy of ways to attempt to clear the water. Here are the things I can say with confidence and certainty from my data and my experiences: 1) Flashpoint is a thing, 2) It means something to be a member of Flashpoint, and those who are (or who were) might not each clearly articulate it, but they illustrate through their practices that they *know* it is a thing and means something to be part of it, 3) While there was rarely malice (and the malice here came from

TheBearTank, who didn't fit), there's a clear sense when someone isn't a part of the Flashpoint thing. In that sense, Flashpoint is a Baudrillardian simulation, a thing that is real in its impact and is obvious to those involved but which is removed from what any conventional measure scholarship might use as a measure of "the real." I can only point to Flashpoint as a gathering of toons in virtual space, and as I articulated at the end of the previous chapter toons are always already hybrid creations to begin with. If I were to meet up with the collection of people who played the toons I've talked about in my research in one physical space, I do not believe any of them but me would protest a claim that it was a "Flashpoint" gathering, but seeing that group of people would not be to see Flashpoint. The group might find clever ways to enact Flashpoint within that space (or, knowing them as I do, they'd all have laptops, find Wi-Fi, and go be Flashpoint in Flashpoint's space on Flashpoint's time and terms), but those bodies, and those people, aren't precisely Flashpoint. I labor this point because this is the next step to understanding digital group identities: the digital reality is a part of the group's identity just as the fusion of player and avatar (or 3-D model) are toons. As more and more collaboration happens online, it will be critical for all of us to take into deep consideration how the technology shapes our groups and the identities we take on.

In the next—and final—chapter of this dissertation I will discuss the implications of my research findings for gaming studies, for Computers & Writing, and for future research in both fields. I will also draw the parallels to other experiences—like the classroom, or other collaborative writing environments—from the introduction back into the discussion, offering

suggestions for application of new techniques in those arenas based on the research I've done in the *World of Warcraft*.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion: "Once We Down Her on Normal, We Go Do it on Heroic"

*It's late in the raid night when we find ourselves in the chamber ruled by Alysrazor, a phoenix, quite literally a gigantic fire bird, and to say we aren't welcome would be an understatement. We have been on what we initially considered a fool's errand: a run to attempt to complete the full set of quite challenging raid "achievements" in the Firelands, the reward from which would be a purple firebird mount that each of us could fly around Azeroth atop, our own little grape Alysrazors. No one on the server had come close, and the reason was the challenge in the chamber we faced.*

*Defeating Alysrazor was not particularly difficult; other than a pair of ten second tornado barrages, the encounter wasn't difficult to handle. But fighting a firebird results in one thing, to be sure: an abundance of fire. In order to complete the achievement, we would have to all ten survive the fight—something we had never done—and we would have to avoid being hit not just by the flaming tornadoes which troubled us so for their ten seconds, but also random fire spells cast by Alysrazor's minions on the ground, the fire spewed by the worms that she dines upon at random intervals, and the fire Alysrazor herself blasts here and there. No one could get hit by a single bit of fire in the entire ten minute (or so—this one would clock at 8:55) encounter.*

*"This isn't going to be pretty," Iceman said, "But we can do it." I grit my goblin teeth and dig into the feast set before us, upping my stamina for reasons that will not help me with the fire dodging but is traditional before any boss fight. "Be ready to wipe a few times here."*

*The first attempt, just like the nightmare where I show up to class in only my boxer shorts, is my mistake for the night: trying to insure that I dodge the lava spew from a worm, I run into a corner and box myself in while fire swirls. I take a hit. "Crap. I'm on fire, guys." The wipe was expected, so no one feels bad but me. At least that's how it seems.*

*Minutes later, our most reliable healer takes a frontal blast from a worm. The next attempt, we get to the tornados and our hunter runs right into the first one. The next attempt we get to the tornados again and our paladin thinks that his immunity bubble will work, but the achievement calls for being hit, not for taking damage. After that, twice in a row that same paladin fails to run the tornado gauntlet. He gets it right the next time, but in the shock of all shockers Iceman, our raid leader, nips the edge of the last tornado in the phase.*

*"Fuck! SON OF A! I DID NOT HIT THAT!"*

*For what it's worth, it really didn't look like he hit that, but the game doesn't lie. At least as of now,* WoW *is incapable of* actual *spite.*

*The next attempt, Iceman is psyched out, and he runs right into a tornado trying to avoid the one in front of him. At this point, it's been a while, and spirits are getting low. "Fuck, I'm sorry guys! It's just one run! We only have to do this once. I'll get my head out of my ass. Let's do this."*

*The next attempt Salty mysteriously gets hit two seconds into the fight. None of us even see the fire that hit him, nor do we understand where it could have come from. We just all know it's time to die and try again.*

*The attempt after that, the group had razor focus during the tornado phase, and Ventrilo is a mess of people calling out spacing instructions to each other. Near the end of the phase, I feel my heart pounding in my chest: if I hit one of these things on a run where everyone's perfect, I'm going to hate myself. The phase ends. We're okay. The attempt continues to go well as we near the second tornado phase. We all spread out and prepare to run. The tornados appear.*

*Then they vanish.*

*"What the?"*

*A message pops up on the screen: "Achievement: Glory of the Firelands Raider." I hear Iceman laughing over Vent. "My last combustion killed the fucker!"*

*Later that night, after finishing the raid, the ten of us rode around Orgrimmar like the world's weirdest biker gang, an assortment of miscreants flying purple firebirds. We'd done something no one else on the server—and few in the world—had pulled off. It was, to quote Salty, "Rub it in their face time."*

I've been asked at numerous conferences, in classrooms, and in discussion with colleagues why I believe video games warrant studying. I often point to the "fun" factor, something I think is critical to understanding what motivates gamers—and would likely motivate all people—to complete repetitive tasks with joy and to develop specific skills which are then honed to a razor's edge. I often likewise point to the consumption of video games in relation to the other media that rhetoric, English, and American studies find to be useful foci: in the last decade, video game spending and consumption has become a popular culture juggernaut, with Americans spending $25.3 billion on games in 2009[26]. By comparison, that same year feature films in first run theater release set a record for their industry at just over $10 billion.[27] Games are deeply entrenched in contemporary popular culture.

But the larger argument I'd make for games isn't about the fact that they're popular, that they're fun, or that the students we often spend our time working with are playing them. What gaming holds for study, I would argue, is a world where learning is collaborative, individual agency and expertise is valued but individual "glory" over group glory— or any delineated power structure— is rarely visible, and group members arrive eager to spend hours facing complex problems and ready to accept multiple failed attempts while building toward progress. I believe that more than any place in popular culture, gaming is where *we* go to learn

[26] From http://www.joystiq.com/2010/05/10/study-americans-spent-25-3-billion-on-games-in-2009/

[27] http://torrentfreak.com/damned-pirates-hollywood-sets-10-billion-box-office-record-091211/

and to achieve things together, and that fact alone means gaming is a powerful storehouse of information waiting to be mined, shined, and deployed by researchers in various fields.

**Opening Horizons: Places This Research Points**

In this moment I return to ideas I shared first in Chapter 2 to restate, and elaborate upon, the five emergent points of this study and their further implications for future research, be that my own or work I envision others doing. I offer each with the caveat that this is based upon one study, and that each will no doubt require more research in order to prove (or disprove) their endurance under rigor. I assert each with the confidence of someone who has spent years researching gamers and gaming, going where gamers do what they do and asking them to show me what they do, all the while doing it myself, trying my best to maintain the rigor of a researcher and the skillset of a true gamer, walking with both feet in each world, hopping there and back, looking on with curiosity and scrutiny, taking notes while never moving all-the-way outside. So, again, my research implications:

**Implication One** (specifically for the study of games): **gamers have a sophisticated sense of collaboration and, through the use of memetics and feedback loops in particular, serve as moment-to-moment literacy sponsors for each other in game scenarios**.

**Implication Two** (extrapolating out to literacy studies in general): **teachers and students can learn a great deal about the value of trying and failing without taking on some sort of emotional burden from watching gamers. Gamers have the balance of "fail to succeed" right in that one successful encounter is worth however many failures it takes**.

**Implication Three** (for the study of digital identity): **when computers and writing scholars and internet researchers talk about digital identity, we need to be careful not to simplify to the point that we lose the texture of the intricate, deliberate, and highly rhetorical interactions between real life identities and online constructs**.

**Implication Four** (also for the study of digital identity and social networking): **it would serve internet researchers well to consider that digital identity is as much a group phenomenon as it is an individual one**.

**Implication Five** (for gaming studies): **Gaming studies will benefit greatly from the utility offered by a memetics framework and closely related…**

**Implication Six** (for the fields of computers and writing, professional writing, and digital rhetoric, if not for all those who study literacy acquisition): **considerations of learning spread wide across a variety of environments could benefit from being viewed through the lens of the meme.**

And with these six implications in mind, I offer the following reflections on what Iceman, Leah, Lint, Salty and the rest of Flashpoint helped me to figure out during my time in Azeroth.

### Nobody Puts DK in a Corner: What I Learned about Collaborating and Failing and Why It Matters to Computers & Writing

During my research, I sometimes saw moments like the one I used to open this chapter: moments when Flashpoint did something that appeared, on the surface, *virtually* impossible. And through watching them wrestle with that encounter, handling the miscues and turning what seemed completely overwhelming—trying to avoid an array of fire attacks—into smaller,

manageable practices while constantly working together and understanding each individuals role in the collaborative whole, everything I've written about here begins to mesh together.

This is how my work differs in significant ways from the gaming studies pieces I've mentioned throughout this dissertation. Much of the current scholarship on gaming looks either at single player scenarios, where it is "me" vs. "the machine," or at direct player-vs.-player scenarios where one player (or a small group) takes on another player (or small group), a trend that starts with Fiske's reflection on the player vs. the arcade machine (1984) and follows through the work of Boghost (2010), Gee (2005), Prensky (2007), Wolfe (2001, 2003) and others. When considering a raiding group, the dynamic is ten independent thinkers in a collective unit vs. the seemingly unerring machine. The computer opponent, with its sophisticated AI, is still ultimately the slave of rule sets and number systems, to harken back to Juul (2005), a thing that knows what it plans to do, what it will do, when it will do it (more or less), and in any given day it grinds through numerous raiders like a lawnmower over spring grass, chewing them up and then spitting them back out. The raid group, meanwhile, will need for all ten members to make the right moves and right choices; in progression raiding, one weak link means everyone's dead. It is not through the ingenuity or raw talent of a single gamer that a raid succeeds or fails. It is through the unified efforts of a group that knows itself and learns together, that can enact learned memetic practices to surround and overwhelm blind dragons, to dance and dodge flaming tornados, to strafe past flaming maggots and leap onto worms to throw harpoons into spikes; in other words, killing dragons is the work of a group. This collaborative spirit is of critical importance in gaming, but it isn't, and shouldn't be, confined to

the game world; our very understanding of collaborative learning should look to such examples as moments to emulate and, yes, memetically transmit.

**Because We Fail, We Succeed: The Spirit of Gaming as Inquiry**

If scholars of composition—I am thinking particularly here of my fellow instructors of digital media writing in the computers and writing community, though this need not be a restrictive thing— were to look at composing and collaboration like a gamer—and I must say, to this point not even gaming studies has done nearly as much of this as I believe it should, much less other fields—there would be numerous instances where the discussion would include, if not focus upon, failure. Of course in the field we don't fail in the same way that gamers fail; I sincerely hope that none of us send our students, or go ourselves, off to die, revive as ghosts city blocks away, then have to jog back to find and reinhabit our bodies as we write. Clearly the stakes, within the construction, are different, as writing failure is not life-and-death. But the very spirit of MMO gaming is the group form of the "probing" that James Gee (2007) discusses in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*; or to greatly simplify his idea while retaining the spirit of it, the mantra that Flashpoint spouts on every new encounter, due in no small part to my pointing it out: try and die, try and die.

An example of this is the paladin in the account I used to start this chapter. He has a spell that gives him a "bubble"—a shield that nothing can damage him through for approximately ten seconds. Ten seconds of horrifying tornados to dodge + ten seconds of bubble (9.7, actually, but close enough)= ? He chose to try it. And he was halfway successful. He did not take any damage. This would mean that after the achievement run, which required him to not get hit at

all, he could forever stand still with his bubble and avoid the Benny Hill-like mess of the other raid members running in circles. This led to two innovations for the group, however. Because of his revelation, I realized that my Death Knight's anti-magic shell could take two tornado hits, so while I still have to run, I can mess up twice and still take no damage. Our mages realized that their ice block skill—which is like a bubble, but doesn't allow them to move, encasing the caster in a block of ice—could likewise defray the tornado damage. Risk=reward. More importantly, the bubble mechanic mixed with a spell called "hand of sacrifice" which allows the Paladin to take the damage being dealt to another player, meant that when running the fire tornado circle all ten members could watch each other and call out if someone was going to take tornado damage, allowing the Paladin to cast the spell and defray that damage. This dramatically changed how Flashpoint addressed that difficult to coordinate portion of an encounter, a moment where so much depends on speed and awareness. But it is only through accepting the potential for failure that these revelations came. To approach the encounter conservatively, to fear the risk, would mean such moments of learning like this could not happen.

### ***WoW*, That's Collaboration**

While considering these moments of collaborative learning, I'd like to revisit Chapter 3 and Flashpoint's time with Magmaw, the gigantic lava worm. While I shared in that chapter the memetic structures and an account of a *successful* encounter with the beast, the members of the group—mostly together[31]—learned that encounter in slow, painful collaborative steps.

[31] Remember, dear reader, that I was with Lint and Salty, along with Sally and Teddy, in TheSkullz, with Iceman joining us as an outsider, when we learned that encounter.

While it might look easy in Chapter 3 because I was writing about an encounter the group knew, it was nearly as time consuming to master Magmaw with TheSkullz as it was to learn Alysrazor with Flashpoint. And the pains that can emerge from this collaborative form of learning come clearer in the undercurrents of Chapter 4 as I discussed TheSkullz inability to master and defeat the blind dragon Atramedes, another encounter which took numerous failures for the group to learn. What might not be as clear in those accounts is precisely how the collaborative learning progressed in terms of sheer data. To illustrate how a group learns a fight in terms of bulk numbers, allow me to offer some statistics. At the start of this chapter I mentioned a night in which Flashpoint finished a difficult achievement in an encounter with a flame bird called Alysrazor. Before actually defeating the bird for the first time, Flashpoint attempted the encounter:

> Total number of raid nights spent learning encounter: **3**
>
> Total hours: **8.5**
>
> Number of attempts: **123**
>
> Number of attempts that ended after approximately 4 minutes due to one or another person being hit by a fire tornado: **51**
>
> Number of players involved in all 123 attempts: **9** (the final spot was held by four different people over the course of the three nights)

Number of attempts longer than four minutes that resulted in the group going further into the encounter: **69** (with one totally botched attempt and two attempts at circumventing the tornados)

Here is what interests me most about this chunk of data, however. The 124th attempt was the first time Alysrazor died. In following weeks, Alysrazor would die on the 125th, 126th, 127th, and 128th attempts by the group. It was more than a month after completing the encounter successfully for the first time that the group failed to complete the encounter in a single attempt in a successive week. This same principle was true for nearly every encounter in my research. The group would go in, learn, then come back and execute week after week. Their learning was not only collaborative but illustrates how knowledge can be distributed over what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls a field of collective knowledge: I do not to this day know how to properly heal the Alysrazor encounter (or really any encounter Flashpoint completed). I never had to play that role. But I know what to do in order to insure that the healers can keep me alive, when to assist them, etc. The healing bit of Flashpoint's collaborative learning wasn't mine to undertake, and it wasn't my piece of the collective knowledge to archive and maintain. That was Salty and Leah's part. Again, here, the importance of knowing roles and executing within the collaborative raid group emerges: as one member of the group, I have to do what I do in the memetic process of completing the encounter, and I need to do it correctly, basically like I did the last time, I need to communicate certain things, I need to listen for certain things, and I need to be ready to apply everything I know to compensate if something goes wrong. But I don't know everything about the encounter; no one in the group does. No one in any group

ever would, in theory, unless that person played multiple toons and hence at one point or another was in every single role.

I sometimes wonder, when I discuss this with others, if perhaps I undersell it because it either sounds simple or obvious, but I want to stop and dwell for a moment on what I've just written: Flashpoint, for the majority of my research, was anywhere from 13-15 people. Ten of those people—often the same nine with one of the others—would raid for three to four hours, three nights a week. They'd encounter things, apply memetic knowledge to it, probe it, talk about it, poke at it, throw sticks at it sometimes, swing axes and swords at it, throw fireballs at it, and when all the virtual smoke cleared and all the virtual clanging of weapons was silent, they'd learned something. Together. And they could then execute it. Each executing a specific , well understood, and mutually respected role. They'd fight. Together. In harmony. With remarkable efficiency. With unified vision even without authoritarian force from any of the members. They (we) chose to go learn to do things, learned to do them, did them, went to find more things to do, enjoyed it, and tallied successes without becoming angry with each other, without struggling for power or being asked to do something they would rather not do, and most importantly, I think, without ever being overwhelmed by despair over the numerous failures involved in succeeding. 124 tries for one win. No one cried. No one blamed anyone for the 123 failures. No one threw in the towel. I was part of it, and sometimes I still find it fascinating. I ask myself how I managed, myself, to watch my little goblin virtual body die 123 times at the hands of the flaming bird without losing my little goblin mind. I didn't because no one else did. That's not how it works. And that, in my eyes, is the most anyone could ever hope for from collaborative learning. This is not to say, of course, that gaming collaboration is idyllic;

as I pointed out in Chapter 4, there are certainly times when people cannot and will not work together or when the group simply doesn't come together in a productive way. The positive take away from seeing that incongruence is that all those players went on to find working collaborations, but I obviously things can and do go wrong with game collaboration.

**Issues of Identity: Gaming and Beyond**

At the end of the previous section I began to reflect upon the identity of Flashpoint., even without specifically meaning to, as group identity is in many ways inescapable when looking at the ability to collaborate. My months with Flashpoint showed me the humming machine of harmonious group identity—in the moments like the one I just related, learning to defeat Alysrazor—and the moments of almost total breakdown due to identity fractures, as I covered to near exhaustion in Chapter 4 when discussing Sally and TheBearTank.

While much has been said already in digital rhetoric and internet research as relates to digital identity, and I have already covered much of that in previous chapters, there exists a group based digital identity that it will be essential to understand as scholarship on gaming and social media moves forward. In particular, I think the interplay between IRL and digital identities that I've noted in this project needs to be further explored and cultivated, as I believe we have a far richer understanding of what it means to belong to an IRL collective and claim that as an identity, but we are several steps behind adapting that into our conception of digital identity. As scholars continue to point the lens at social networking sites like Facebook, where the "real" identity is a fixture at the center of the construction, consideration of the sort of idealized and "tried on" identities of the early internet and how those practices intertwine with

what I would consider a selective filtering of the real with an idealized and/or experimental, or simply highly rhetorically constructed fiction will become critical, as will the consideration of how all those other identities that are networked to the individual Facebook account contribute to that identity/form yet another collective identity. Gamers—and social media users, in fact users in general of networked technologies— aren't vacationing online, they're establishing lives there. They're working there as much as they work in the real world, and scholarship should reflect that. The primacy that some place on the "real," while deeply entrenched in tradition and certainly worthy of our respect, stands the very real risk of allowing our collective sense of what is actually "real" in effect to become antiquated. Material space and the idea of seeing people "face-to-face" doesn't carry the same importance in 2012 that it did even a decade, and certainly a century, earlier. Iceman, for example, still reacts with a "I didn't see you last night," when I don't login, addressing me both in language and in sentiment as if there was a place where we went, where I was expected, where I did not appear. The game space is that "real" to him (and to me, and to the others in the group).

As we as scholars begin to look more and more at groups who come together online to share information and do things, we need to think about the influence of individuals on the collective and the collective on individuals, and this will mean understanding what exactly the collective and the individual claim to be, practice as, and strive to be considered. It will no longer be enough, as research moves forward, to say things like "and this happened as part of a Facebook discussion page" or "in their raid group;" such generalizations obscure a large portion of what is really happening and ignore the careful rhetorical moves made in unison by the collectives being essentially minimized by short, standard description. Flashpoint's gaming is a

serious pursuit by people who are invested and who in the scope of *WoW* have become masters of a very particular set of skills and the nuanced, socially based collaborative ways to maximize those skills for the achievement of goals.

**Shifting Gears: The Meme as Heuristic**

I hope that those who read my work will consider the deep value of memetics as a method of inquiry for gaming studies and as a potential alternative frame to the existing narratology/ludology split that I believe does the field a disservice by fracturing scholarship. Memetics is perfectly suited to gaming in particular, where so much of what happens, from the rule set that governs the game to the interactions of players with the computer and with each other, to the story and character development, is repeatable and replicable—and often must be replicated and copied either directly or indirectly in order for the game to proceed toward success. This is true in non-computer based games as well; for example, the memetic underpinning of the game of basketball is that the ball is passed up court, or moved through a player dribbling, until someone shoots, with the goal being to put the ball through the hoop, then the other team does it again. In that example the meme is highly modifiable and mutates over the course of a game—lest the sport be reduced to drudgery-- but at the base level, the meme is intact.

Memetics offers great potential as a research framework. While there is danger of drifting toward totalizing, the construction of the meme is highly adaptable and allows for consideration of both actions/practices and artifacts/products as discreet units. It is well suited to study of digital environments and studies that include any repetitive or rhythmic/cyclic

activity, which based on my own research experience covers a wide range of what matters to the collective fields my work resides in, from collaborative work to the writing process, from the study of networks to considerations of document design. Repetition and memecry (to attempt to coin my own word) abound.

While I want to again caution against the idea that "everything" is memetic, the reality of research is that most things that humans do and create truly are memetic. A great deal of human behavior is based on the foundation of repeating, understanding the repeated processes, then modifying for other tasks or personal desire. We come to write by replicating letters we see and are taught to compose through a series of repeated motions with a writing implement. We then communicate by stringing words together in specific ways, ways we most often understand from hearing and reading in other places. We cook by following recipes, which are food-and-ingredient memes (and which often include following the actions of others, if learned from someone who is cooking at the time or from watching *Food Network*). We are meme machines.

Memes also nest well, allowing for a way to consider larger processes as smaller practices that knit together, something I illustrated in Chapter 3. This sort of construction can be utilized to study writing, too, for example, in multiple ways. The process of writing is a series of memes: brainstorming-- which can follow a series of different memetic practices (free writing, outlining, bubbling, etc.), drafting—where writing styles and genres become memetic guides for composing, and revision—the recursive process of revisiting and adapting. The mechanical process of writing can also be seen as memetic, as the act of composing sentences,

and grouping them into paragraphs (or not, in the case of poetry or other creative forms) follows a memetic form. More importantly, however, the seemingly totalizing nature of this example highlights the strength of the memetic framework: by highlighting and categorizing data, and shaping understanding, by looking at what is similar/replicated/repeated, that which is different, which is innovative, and which is groundbreaking is brought into sharp *contrast* for review and consideration. The ubiquity of the meme highlights the moments of change, the moments of critical adaptation, and the moments of true innovation in what might appear on the surface to be a constant series of repeated and slightly adapted practices.

Let me reiterate one key consideration here: the problem I face, when I look at gaming studies as a discipline, is the split described earlier in this piece: there are the narratologists—focusing on narrative and borrowing heavily from literary studies frameworks, and there are the ludologists—placing primacy on the rule systems and underlying programming of games. While these are both valuable inquiries, the duality leaves gaming studies scholars with an interesting dilemma, as there is an invisible hand directing those who step into the field to go in one direction or the other. A study like mine, however, doesn't lend itself particularly to one side or the other of that purely-subdiscipline-generated split, nor has my way of thinking about games ever fit neatly on one side or the other of this theoretical fence. My way of navigating to a useful space is to utilize my memetics framework as the explanation of where this work emerges, as the meme finds a comfortable home in both camps; game narratives are memetic, and game rule sets and systems are memetic. The meme becomes a bridge between the two sides, my gate in the fence so to speak. I hope that my work can offer that potential bridge to

other scholars who find their work clearly in the purview of gaming studies but, like mine, not clearly suited for either side of the subfield's current split.

**Future Considerations: Where I'm Headed Next**

I started this document, some 200 pages ago, with what I consider in some ways to be a confessional. A mentor of mine, Malea Powell, almost always starts her work by noting that her work is a "story," a tradition which I believe while I haven't until this point directly invoked I have spiritually followed in the footsteps of, attempting to allow my stories about the activities of my participants to illustrate those things I found most valuable in my research. But my confession was, is, and always will be, the driving force behind why I am who I am and why I chose to do what I do. I've always asked questions. My mother informs me that "why" was my third word (after "mama" and "fry-fry"—evidence of my love for my mother and food respectively). I started asking questions before I was even a year old, and I haven't stopped.

At the end of a project like this, then, my gut reaction is to offer up the cacophony of questions in my head. What about race? What if someone in the group WAS radically different than the others (in whatever way)? What about language barriers? Do Goblins dream of electric sheep? Does that fact that some players have extremely rare, hard to obtain items make them game rich? Does that mean their toons have economic value? What's that do to the sense of materiality? Blizzard is auctioning off old server blades. Does that mean I can hold the physical space where we raided in my hand? If someone goes to the armory webpage and looks up Iceman, sees his achievements and his gear, is that a history of Flashpoint?

I could keep going. And in that sense, I hope that my readers understand just how

fascinating, but also how at times difficult to reign in, I've found this entire project. I think I could spend the rest of my life tossing questions into the *World of Warcraft* and getting back answers that I'm positive have something new to tell each and every one of us. But what I'd like to do here, as I step away from my project, is detail the project I've been building the foundation for as I moved through the process of finalizing this document.

*Facebook Games, Collaboration and Writing*

One of the things I really want to do with the knowledge I've put together here is employ it in teaching. I have, to some critique, pointed out that I see problems with the general philosophy undergirding the Serious Games movement. I believe that in some ways my critique of Serious Gaming has been misunderstood; I do not mean to proclaim that games developed primarily for learning are "bad" or ill conceived; I actually feel quite the opposite. What has caused me to pause, and continues now to cause me to toss out caveats, is that those who create serious games, based on their writing about what they've done and thought about (Barab et. al. 2010, Boghost, 2009, Prensky, 2001, 2006), may well be starting from the wrong side of the equation and hence are losing what I think is key: the playability factor.

Another form of games I've looked at in a curious way over the last several years are the newly emerging social games on platforms like Facebook. These are games that are in some ways greatly simplified, but they retain interesting gaming elements and many of them, like the extremely popular *Farmville* or the movie tie-in combat/quest game *Marvel: Avengers Alliance*, are structurally similar to *World of Warcraft*. There is one major difference, however, that I

find particularly intriguing: these games have a highly social collaborative element built in, but they are still at their core games that a single player plays to achieve a series of memetic tasks.

I dove head-first into one of these games—*Avengers Alliance*—to see what precisely happened as the game progressed. I found that there was a memetic system underlying, and like any game there was a set of rules for play, but I noted quickly that I needed my friends for assistance and I needed the expertise of others. I spent hours reading and writing, figuring out how to succeed at the game. In the end, success at the game as I understand it are about managing time, maximizing the use of friends for support and expertise, and getting better as one charts the path to whatever that player considers success.

At which point my next project hit me: there has to be a way to develop a writing environment that borrows from this philosophy of design. What I imagine is a virtual space where time management of a project can be mapped in a game-like way, so that the achievement of things (for example the acquisition of a piece of research data, the writing of a thesis statement, etc.) can be visualized and understood as a step in progression. The process of creating an avatar will give the student a chance to envision a writer-self and to inhabit that writing self in a different space—a space where failing is like playing a game and not like me drawing a red "F" on their draft. At the same time the game's nature would remind the writer of how long until the deadline and would encourage the next step, could build in tasks that lead to small-scale revision while writing, etc. Most importantly, the mechanism for including others and asking friends for help could become a powerful tool for writing if students could view it as

a way of collecting assets to ask their classmates to read over something, to discuss ideas with them, etc.

While this idea is no doubt ambitious and unlike some of my follow-up study ideas (such as the study I have planned next in *WoW*, looking specifically at a few users who racially identify as other to their guilds) could lead to a great deal of trial and error, I believe the spirit of the project best illustrates what I've learned from this study: gamers do work, game work is about setting and achieving goals, it requires memetic activity and precision, it requires social help, and it requires the formation of an identity in that space as well as a collective identity for the group that is collaborating. Blending composing with gaming nature allows for the emphasis on the value of trying and failing, the importance of not trying to "go it alone," and will hopefully illustrate that waiting until the last minute will greatly limit the chances of success. This will, of course, be a long term project, but if it can be executed the way I envision it, I believe it could be of massive importance to innovating how writing instruction is delivered in online spaces (and perhaps in face-to-face spaces as well).

**Game (not actually) Over: Closing Thoughts**

As human life becomes more interconnected through digital collaborative spaces, and as more and more people join the growing legions of online gamers, the value of what the gaming community can teach all of us about who we are, how we think, how we communicate, and what we choose to do with our time and efforts will exponentially increase. From the classroom to the board room, from the local bar to the sports arena, from the mall to the hospital, people network and become the composition of networks. As we look at how they

work, so too must we look at how they play, how they interact, and how they live. My participants came to the *World of Warcraft* to have fun, but as it turns out, Iceman, Leah, Lint and Salty taught me a great deal about what it means to be a goblin, and in being a better goblin, I've become a better person, a better thinker, a better scholar, a better learner. I came away with virtual dragons to fly over virtual countryside, with an impressive coffer of virtual gold, and with a number of fantastic, ornate virtual weapons. I came away with thirteen friends, and I leave their virtual world knowing that as long as there is a Flashpoint, there's always a place for me to go be a goblin and learn to do more things, where much like in the television series *Cheers* someone will yell "Phill" when I walk into the virtual room and my gigantic mushroom stool at the bar will always be waiting. But most importantly, I came away with a rich understanding of their world—a world with 11.5 million virtual residents living out a dream of collaborative fun— and what they have to tell anyone who is willing to listen to the stories. I hope that I have done them justice. I hope that I have shared at least some of what they have to tell all of us.

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