

4 Theoriz- ing Role- Play in World of Warcraft

“How’s Duck doing?” I asked Zoe, who was sitting at the dinner table. It was a Wednesday evening and one of our regular PnP role-play groups, three men and women between 24 and 40 years old, was gathered at my place.

I invited Zoe to join the group after we started role-playing in *World of Warcraft* (WoW), because she was curious about other forms of role-play. While two of us were cooking dinner, everyone was chatting loudly. The topics of conversation ranged from study and jobs to politics and games, and was interwoven with inside jokes. After WoW was released, the atmosphere in the group changed drastically. While half of the group plays WoW and likes to talk about it, the other half wants the “WoW-word” to be avoided, complaining that the talk about online friends, role-play adventures, leveling, and mounts is incomprehensible. In the middle of the buzz, Zoe had her mobile phone out and was writing a text message to Duckular.

In chapter 2, I introduced the gnome character Duckular as the president of the Legitimate Business Club, a criminal role-play guild. With her character Freckles, Zoe has been role-playing a romantic relationship with Duckular for more than a year. Eventually they also became friends out of character. After Zoe finished typing a text message, she looked up and said, “He’s bored at work.” While Zoe sent a couple more text messages to Duck, we talked about the type of friendship they have and their differences in age, nationality, and outlook on life. In many ways their friendship is an unlikely one; without WoW, the 29-year-old Zoe would never have spoken to a 20-year-old guy from a small town in England. While we talked, I pondered on how both our conversation and the setting in which we have the conversation are examples of how frames of game, play and culture, and player and researcher are deeply intertwined. Our conversation ended when someone from the group interrupted: “Could you stop talking about *Warcraft*? Dinner is ready.”

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the cognitive frames belonging to the game, play, and culture are interwoven in role-playing games. The fact that there are highly porous frames existing within other frames does not mean that people cannot separate the different frames of meaning and convention. Rather, the tension between the frames is continually negotiated; joking is, for instance, often a form of conscious frame-mixing (Goffman 1974, Fine 1983).

I would suggest that both instrumental and dramatic conflict in role-playing games are the trigger for (re)constructing individual and shared cognitive frames. We can understand this mixing of frames as a form of what cognitive researchers Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner called "conceptual blending" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). They stated that learning, thinking, and behavior emerge out of a subconscious process in which concepts from diverse contexts are blended.

Building on my detailed description in chapter 2, the focus in this chapter lies on further understanding role-play on a European WoW RP server. From a network perspective, I aim to understand the effects of computer-mediation on the role-play experience. How do role-players create and negotiate dramatic conflict in an MMORPG which is aimed at instrumental conflict? How does this lead to a (re)construction of both real and imaginary roles, frames, and interpersonal relationships?

This chapter is based on the last phase of my research,³⁵ in which I set up overt collaborations with other players. I told the group of players presented in chapter 2 that I am not only a player but also a researcher. They read and commented on the chapter and gave their consent for publication. Meanwhile, Zoe started an unofficial server forum, for a small but growing network of similar-minded role-players for discussing and organizing role-play, events, storytelling, instancing and general chat. On Zoe's forum I opened a "RP theory 101" sub-forum in order to theorize role-play together with other players. Furthermore, I invited the protagonists from chapter 2 to participate in an in-game discussion on online role-play.

³⁵ The methodological appendix includes an explanation of the three research phases I went through.

Gathering at the Eastvale Logging Camp

One Friday evening³⁶ I logged onto WoW with Speckles in order to welcome two sturdy-looking female dwarfs, two male gnomes, and a dark-skinned human to our in-game discussion on role-play at the Eastvale Logging Camp. The camp, which consists of a few houses where non-player characters hand out quests to newly started player-characters, can be found in vast woodlands of Elwynn Forest, the homeland of the human capital city of Stormwind. Once everyone had arrived, we sat down on the grass near a place where NPCs were busy chopping wood. The participants in the discussion were Duckular (Ed, English, 20), Eiswein (Jørgen, Norwegian, 24), Fingelsbrew (Jonte, Swedish, 18), Freckles (Zoe, Dutch, 29), and Kalistra (Barbara, Italian, 34).³⁷ However, most of them did not join the discussion with their "main" (most important) character but with an "alt," an alternative character. Each of these participants have played WoW since day one, and all of them, except Fingelsbrew, are still playing the game. Duckular used to play the MMORPG *Star Wars Galaxies* (Sony Online Entertainment 2003), but grew tired of it and decided to give WoW a go. Never having role-played before, he discovered in WoW that role-play added an extra purpose to the game and moved from a PvE server to a RP server. The same goes for Freckles, who had played many games but never role-played before WoW. The others do have experience in either PnP RPGs, LARP, and/or role-play in other MMORPGs, and to them it was an obvious choice to play on a RP server. Both Fingelsbrew and Eiswein are long-time fans of Warcraft games; Fingelsbrew has experience in LARP and Eiswein has been a gamemaster in many PnP RPGs. Kalistra used to play PnP RPGs with her brother and later moved on to playing the MMORPG *Ultima Online* (Electronic Arts 1997): "I used to RP with my brother and his friends but i think that (PnP) is a completely different experience id say less risky - less rewarding in terms of RP because online you really dont know the person behind, which makes their character more true." All of them are serious or "hardcore" role-players. However, next to role-playing they also participate in PvE and PvP styles of play and some of them, like Freckles, also have high-level characters on other servers. They often spend a few hours per day online, which compares to the average of 22.7 hours a week that players tend to invest in WoW (Yee 2005); for some, however, it can total up to 60 hours a week, as in the case of Fingelsbrew, who ran an in-game tavern. The enormous time investment was the reason he quit playing WoW.

Even though the discussion was obviously taking place out of character (OOC) and in raidchat, the players did role-play. A fire was made to keep the imaginary cold away, and they emoted to be knitting or waving to player-characters passing by. Also, emotes were used to structure the discussion, so that everyone could have their say. The topics that we discussed were based on chapter 2 and a quote from

³⁶ 26 January 2007.

³⁷ According Yee's quantitative study of WoW players, the average age of the WoW player is 28.3 years (SD = 8.4). 84% of players are male, and 16% are female. Female players are significantly older (M = 32.5, SD = 10.0) than male players (M = 28.0, SD = 8.4) (Yee 2005).

a recent study on the social life of guilds on North American WoW servers (Williams et al. 2006). This study concluded that the game's code is the key moderator in the ways in which the game extends real-life relationships and encourages the forming of new relationships online. In comparing the guild life and social capital of the different server types, they concluded that on a RP server the OOC guild politics and behaviors were very similar to those on PvE and PvP servers. However, they noted one remarkable exception on the role of gender on RP servers:

What was abundantly clear however is that people on RP servers are playing another game entirely. The guild life, social connections, player roles, and player behavior were all different on RP servers because of the metalevel difference in rule sets. True role-players talk "in character." That is, if a player is a 32-year-old woman from New Jersey playing a male night elf, she talks like the night elf, not the woman. Yet for even the most dedicated RPer, there is usually the ability to talk "OOC," or "out of character," and to be their "true" real-life persona. On that level, the guild politics and behaviors were largely similar to those found on the other server types. One notable exception might be the role of gender on RP servers. Players' sex lives played a larger role, as did flirting, dating, and even real-life cheating and promiscuity. According to one female interviewee, this is the result of two things: the very aggressive nature of female players on RP servers and the relative scarcity of dominant "alpha male" players. (Williams et al. 2006, 356-357, emphasis by me)

I decided to confront my fellow role-players with this quote, as to me it underlined three of the most contested subjects I had run into over the last two years: First of all, the large amount of male and female role-players getting involved in in-character (IC) relationships including marriage; secondly, power play through meta-gaming by female players, especially in regard to the themes of love and romance; and thirdly, the highly contested nature of sexuality and cybersex.

Counter to what Williams et al. suggest, I have shown in chapter 2 that self-proclaimed role-play guilds often modify the social structure of the guild as it is embedded in the code of the game. The guilds are organized according to IC status and position, and sometimes the use of the OOC guild channel is avoided in order to make the role-play experience as coherent as possible. Furthermore, they connect the role of gender only to the frame of the player; I believe that we need to understand the complexity of relationships, sexuality, and alpha-females in the context of the interplay between the frames of person, player and character.

Person-Player-Character Relationships

The group's first response to the quote was precisely about the relation between person, player, and character. Eiswein set out to bracket off the relation between the game and real life: "our behavior doesn't necessarily reflect our real life persona. I don't think people necessarily are in real life what they are in this game. But it depends on how good you're at diversifying the two." Fingelsbrew argued that a character always reflects the person playing the game: "I mean, I play Fingelsbrew as a real ass-licker to be frank. But he also has a darker side, which few have actually seen. I believe that even those come from you. I mean, we all have every types of personas in us."

Fingelsbrew: "Fingelsbrew is a part of me, very many parts of me actually. As I said before, I believe that all characters we make are just parts of us. Fingels is somewhat of what I'd like to be, very nice but at the same time decisive when it's demanded of him. Although he could be little of a less asslicker :P His personality is very much like my own of course, but he has the privilege that he can do all the stuff I can't. F.e. he can be a shady crook, decisive and determined, but still be very respected in many things and hold many friends. And of course, he never dances badly.. But that's a sidenote. When I take on the role of Fingels, I try to think as he does, how would he react, with the past he's got, the experiences, etc." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

In the previous chapter, I have shown how studies on analogue RPGs all concluded that the interpretation frames of person, player, and character are deeply intertwined as experiences and meaning seep from person to character and vice versa. In order to gain a better understanding the relationship between person, player, and character we discussed character creation and character development through the different forms of dramatic conflict.

Character creation and development

WoW offers only a very limited number of possibilities for character creation. A player must choose between the two factions of Horde and Alliance, and with the recent expansion (*The Burning Crusade*, 2007), each faction has five races from which to choose. After selecting a race (for instance night elf, orc, or gnome) and gender, the player picks a class (for instance warrior, druid, or mage) and can design the character's outward appearance from a limited number of options including skin color, facial features, hairstyle, and color, and depending on race and gender, there may also be a choice of facial hair, tusks, piercings, markings, or earrings.

I found there are many different ways in which players on a RP server create their characters. Some players choose on the basis of the instrumental possibilities that certain races and classes offer, and select looks that they like. Others make careful decisions on race, class, gender, and looks in combination with a background story in which the character is coherently portrayed in the context of the



Figure 1: Gathering around a campfire at the Eastvale Logging Camp.

i trained up my fishing



lore of Azeroth or a specific role-play guild. And some players (loosely) base their character on a book or film, a person they met, or on a previously played character in a PnP RPG, LARP, or MMORPG. An important aspect of character creation is a the name of the character, which has profound implications for both in-game and out of game social interactions, and thus also for ethnographic research into MMORPGs.

What's in a name? In WoW, players can give their character only one name, role-players often choose a first name, a last name, or a nickname that expresses the personality of the player. With regular interface settings, the name of the character shows in-game as a tagline above the character's head. In chapter 2, Jørgen underlined the importance of a name in role-play interaction by using the example of his gnome character, Highfart. Even though he role-played his gnome, many player-characters refused to interact with him due to his name. Normally a character's name cannot be changed, the only exception being when a name is being reported by players for violating the role-play policies. Highfart was reported, and it was only after his name was changed into Alabast that player-characters interpreted him as a fellow role-player. A character's name functions as more than just an in-game reference, it has meaning beyond the framework of the character, as well. Both in-game and out of game, the character and character's name is also an important point of reference within the game and primary frameworks.

When player-characters meet each other in WoW for the first time, they interpret not only the character but also the player "behind the character." This interpretation process is based on the character's appearance, behavior, name, and OOC communication (if the latter is present). Even when players talk OOC, the frame of reference will still be the character. If players also start to communicate out of game, for instance through MSN, I found that the character often continues to be the point of reference for the player, even after exchanging birth names, pictures, and information from primary frameworks. Both consciously and unconsciously, players thus construct the identity of others and their selves, which consists of "crossovers" between the person, player, and character. These crossovers often carry the names of the characters, which in role-play communities thus become signifiers for both an in-game fictional role as well as an out of game construction of the player-person identity, that influence each other, and vice versa. Discussing the relationship between players and characters, game researcher Jonas Linderøth suggested that a character functions not only as a pawn or role but also as a prop, which can be used as part of a player's presentation of self (Linderøth 2005). Character names can become player's nicknames and, often jokingly, players mix the different frames. This can also be confusing and can lead to misunderstandings when players interpret the mixing of frames differently. With regard to research, I believe this means that we cannot and should not be looking for the motivations of the "player behind the character," because players and their motivations are always mediated by the game-related interplay between person, player, and character. In a similar vein, my researcher's identity is a combination between these different frameworks. In order to emphasize that it is precisely this mix of identities that creates meaning, I chose to discuss player's experiences of and ideas on role-

play both in-game and out of game. Furthermore, I decided to use the character's name in most cases to refer to their opinions, as this signifies the specific context in which we exchanged ideas.

Now lets get back to Elwynn Forest. The player-characters who had gathered often carefully select the outward appearance of their characters and they make sure that the (simple) background story and some character traits are coherent with the game world. They have a preference for common or low-profile characters such as tavern keeper, journalist, watchman, pickpocket, or photographer. However, these simple "jobs" often can hide the "real" character and his or her personal goals. The kind tavern keeper Fingelsbrew Steepsprocket had, for instance, a darker side which made him best friends with criminal organizations in Stormwind. In other words, these personal goals are used to interact with other players and thus develop the character over time.

Eiswein on his character Nath Shadoweyes, the night elf who founded the Stormwind City Watch: "When Nath materialized in Teldrassil I first intended him to be a sadistic villain with great leadership skills and visions. But something changed when I passed with him through Darnassus. He put on some common dialect and sold a staff to an unsuspecting elf for 3 times the real price. Suddenly he had a dual personality and a beloved character was born." (e-mail interview, April 2005)

Freckles: "Freckles personality came gradually into being by her interactions with other characters on the server, which shaped her into a kind and warmhearted person who would go through fire and water for her loved ones and shares a passion with her twin sister for tinkering and photography." (e-mail interview January 2007)

What counts as a "good character" and "good role-playing" is a negotiated subject on every RP server. However, Nick Yee was able to distill a set of guidelines for role-play out of his recent survey on role-playing across MMORPGs that matched my experiences. These guidelines revolve around trying to stay IC, playing open-ended characters whose characteristics develop over time (drama queens and ultra villains or heroes are seldom accepted), the use of coherent spelling when performing the character in chat and emotes, preventing the use of OOC knowledge (meta-gaming), trying to accommodate the role-play of other player-characters, not using power emotes that force another player into an unwanted action, and lastly, if OOC comments need to be made, they should be clearly marked (Yee 2006).

Character interaction	stay IC, accommodate others, develop character over time
Textual communication	coherent writing and spelling, mark OOC comments
Story telling	don't god-mode (power-emoting), don't meta-game (misusing OOC knowledge IC)

Table 1: The protocols of role-play as formulated by players (Yee 2006).

Furthermore, Yee argued that it is not the guidelines themselves that are contested, but how strictly and how often these guidelines are followed. As I noted earlier, this is a recurring source of tension both in-game and on the official forum. Due to the lack of a traditional gamemaster or role-play being embedded in the code of the game, role-players have to negotiate both the formal rules (role-play policies) and these informal rules of role-play among themselves. A hardcore role-player will follow these guidelines and etiquette as strictly as possible, but he or she is continually confronted with players who do not. The experiences of hardcore role-players therefore give us much insight on the negotiation processes over the rules of role-play.

Dramatic conflict

Not only do the rules of role-play have to be negotiated by the WoW role-player, they also create and negotiate their own dramatic conflict and rewards. The game itself only includes triggers and rewards for instrumental conflict. Sometimes role-players use game-generated quests as a background or trigger for dramatic conflict, however, often they bracket off the time that they are participating in PvE or PvP play as OOC-play.

I found that role-players create and negotiate two types of dramatic conflict: improvised conflict and story-driven conflict, both of which can run from open-ended to pre-scripted. Furthermore, role-players often organize events that (loosely) fit into the lore of Azeroth. Events such as parties, moon prayers, caravans, weddings, and tavern nights are opportunities to meet other role-players. These events allow for both improvised conflict and story-driven conflict.

It is important not to confuse conflict with competition, as conflict can also occur in collaboration. Competitive environments will always cause conflict. In a competitive situation, two or more actors have mutually inconsistent goals, for example, when Actor A tries to reach her goal she will likely undermine the attempts of Actor B to reach his. Conflict can also occur in the event of collaboration. While two or more actors may have consistent goals, the manner in which they try to reach their goal can still undermine the actions of other actors. These are, of course, ideal types; in practice, the different styles of conflict often overlap.

The unwritten rules for “good” role-play and dramatic conflict have many similarities with what has been called simulationism or immersionism in PnP role-play and LARP (Kim 1997, Bøckman 2003, Edwards 2001). This style of role-play has been interpreted somewhat differently by various authors, however, they all consider simulationist role-play as a style of play in which players want their character’s behavior and circumstances to be logical and coherent in the context of the fictional game world. With the term “immersionism,” Petter Bøckman added the idea of “living the role’s life, feeling what the role would feel” to simulationism (Bøckman 2003). Which is, according to Eiswein, the essence of role-playing. Commenting on the detailed description in chapter 2, he said: “I loved the immersion parts of it. Where you talked of of how you tried to immerse yourself into the role etc. it captures the core (and fun) of roleplaying to me. Especially the parts with the narrative raidchat (which was an experiment from my side really) or where speckles would bring her zoomlenses etc.”

Improvised conflict. Improvised conflict functions in a similar way as simulationism in the Threefold Model (Kim 1997), which rejects the use of melodramatic hooks or a prepared dramatic structure to create a story. The players are encouraged to proactively drive play by seeking out conflict. Conflict should arise from goals which are personally important to the character. “In the end you’re likely to have a more biographical feel to a simulationist campaign. In narrative terms, it will often lack dramatic closure to events, with some plots trailing off and others only dipping into. However, it will also have an ever-increasing depth of detail and relations. This makes the plots complex and rich in meaning” (Kim 1997).

Story-driven conflict. Story-driven conflict has many similarities to dramatist (Kim 1997) or narrativist (Edwards 2004) PnP role-play. This style values how well the in-game action creates the end results of a satisfying storyline. Players and organizers will act not so much according to “realism” but according to an interesting story output. Depending on the organizer or “gamemaster” of story-driven conflict, the events can be either open-ended or pre-scripted.

Role-Playing Relationships

Relationships between player-characters can evolve both out of improvised and story-driven conflict. However, especially during the first weeks after the release of WoW, most players participated in improvised dramatic conflict. Through improvisation and conventions from the primary and player frameworks (learned by having played previous games), the rules and culture of *Argent Dawn* were being shaped. It was in this context that I ran into the stubborn gnome Alabast while playing my green-haired gnome character, Yara. If we go back to that situation, described earlier in chapter 2, we can see that Alabast created a dramatic conflict by flirting with Yara: "Yara your eyes sparkle like the metal in your chain mail. Its wonderful." Alabast then used Yara's positive response to his flirtations as a dramatic hook to start his guild, the Archmages.

When I asked the players gathered in Elwynn Forest why they thought that romantic relationships are so important in role-play, Jørgen (who also role-plays Alabast) responded: "I think relationships are one of the most conflict-filled experiences around, so maybe thats why people enjoy roleplaying relationships so much?" This was in line with the way that he had used flirting as dramatic conflict when first meeting Yara. Fingelsbrew and Duckular had a slightly different take on the subject. They believed that role-playing a romantic relationship is part of a successful "alternative real life" and makes the Fantasy world more "real."

Fingelsbrew: "I believe that relationships are in RP for a very simple reason.. We live through relationships in Real life. And RP is a way of creating an alternative Real life, thus relationships have to be present for the alternative world to work for us." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Duckular: "I agree with fingelsbrew really. Relationships are a big part of life. Ultimately they are the purpose of life really (Well, working on the basis of my studies in animals... but i'll shut up :p). In RP, we are RPIng another life... and we (usually) want that life to be as successful as possible.. and that includes our character having a relationship there too..." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

As much as being single may be an issue in "real life" (in this case, European society), it is also an issue in the Fantasy world of Azeroth, thus conventions from our daily life are fed into the game. Besides making a move on another player-character though improvisation or story-driven role-play, players also organize events such as Valentine's Day celebrations where single player-characters can hook up. Fingelsbrew also expressed the concept of virtual worlds as safe places for experimentation or compensation: "Using the characters as a image of anonymity the players are able to play relationships both sexual and emotionally more easily. which may be used to compensate for private life."

The tension between IC and OOC

While the conflict of role-played love affairs can indeed lead to interesting role-play experiences, it can also be a resource for conflicting feelings over the relation between person, player, and character, which players describe as the tension between IC and OOC. In his study on the impact of romantic relationships in North American LARPs, Gordon Olmstead-Dean argued that live-action role-play is deeply tied in with the human need for contact and intimacy. Therefore it should not surprise us that players who have no training as actors often don't know how to deal with the relation between themselves as a person-player and the character when they get into situations where they act out dramatic interpersonal situations, (Olmstead-Dean 2007).

In chapter 2, I noted both my pleasure and uneasiness about role-playing the romantic relationship between Alabast and Yara. Even though I had role-played a few romances in PnP RPGs, I wondered whether I would have performed Yara's crush on Alabast had we been talking OOC from the beginning as well. When role-playing a relationship in PnP RPGs, I always knew the player behind the character, and it was always clear that the relationship functioned as dramatic conflict and not as an OOC romance. In LARP the separation between IC and OOC can be harder to make because the player embodies the character, while in computer-mediated role-play, the physical distance between player and character is similar to PnP role-play. However, instead of getting to know the player behind the character to make sure that the aim was role-play, I felt that bracketing off OOC would be more effective in making sure that the relationship stayed in the realm of make-believe. Furthermore, I chose not to break the IC barrier in order to keep the role-play as coherent and surprising as possible. Once I broke the IC/OOC barrier between Yara and Alabast, we almost stopped role-playing our characters. When we did role-play Yara and Alabast together, I often refused to communicate OOC in order to keep the characters in their own world. In general I try to keep OOC talk during role-play to a minimum, as I often find that it breaks the tension of the dramatic experience.

A different story is told by Duckular and Freckles, whose characters indirectly hooked up due to a story-driven conflict that I had triggered by having Speckles disappear during a nightly trip in the dark forest of Duskwood. During the search for her beloved sister, Freckles fell in love with the then vice-president of the Legitimate Business Club (LBC), who helped her among others in the search. Unlike my relationship with Alabast, Duckular and Freckles do mix IC and OOC. Freckles explained that being friends and talking OOC while role-playing helps them deal with the tension between IC and OOC.

Duckular: "when frecks and ducks were together for many months, after a while there was a small period of time where i wasnt 100% sure where it was going OOC... anyway, we cleared that up and since then we've just become very very good friends OOC" (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Freckles: "we can count ourself lucky that it turned out that way. In our case I guess talking ooc and being friends gives us the opportunity to get in depth RP and comment at the same time on it. It can be very moving at times (saying goodbye, not knowing if the other will return

ic'ly) I think it also gives us the opportunity to get a grip on IC things and seperate things. We comment about other players, but mostly about our own rp as well. I mean we can have a moving moment and also say that OOC'ly to each other. 'aww they are so cute! Or.. ow poor duck'" (in-game discussion, January 2007)

In these cases, both the male and female characters were also played by heterosexual male and female players. However, genderswapping or genderbending is a common practice in WoW. According to Yee, men are 7 to 8 times as likely to genderbend than women (Yee 2005). Thus there is a fair chance that a male player-character hooks up with a female character that is role-played by a man. From a role-play perspective it should not matter whether the character is played by a male or female. The same goes for age, of course; even though the average WoW player is 28 years old, there are also 14-year-old players as well as 50 year olds. Although there are males playing females in a heterosexual relationship, most (heterosexual) male players find it uncomfortable to role-play an IC romantic relationship with a player of the same sex. Fingelsbrew: "At a roleplayer perspective; it wouldn't matter. But at a more personal perspective, it would feel odd that a part of you has a homosexual relationship." An exception needs to be made with regard to IC homosexual couples. While players seldom role-play male homosexual couples, lesbian romances, often consisting of two night elves, a race which appearance is highly sexualized, were fairly common especially during the early days of the server. It is a public secret that they are often role-played by men. Hiero (Marcus, 27, Scottish), a player-character writing on the RP Theory 101 forum, suggested that it may be easier for a man to play a lesbian due to primary frame conventions seeping into the realm of Fantasy.

Hiero: "At a psychological level I think this is a product of rampant homophobia. Homosexual females are treated much differently to males. The response of the average guy (Well, in this case it's the average person who's come into the Hotel bar this evening) to the following words are as below: Lesbian: Phwoaaar! Yes please!, Gay: Bums against the wall boys, here comes the fag. And I think this kind of social conditioning overlaps into playing. Playing a female character who is attracted to male characters is probably just a bit too close to being gay for the average male ego to take." (RP Theory 101 forum, March 2007)

Role-played weddings

In order to take their romantic relationship to the next level, player-characters often get married. The Snap Sisters were sometimes invited to photograph a wedding, for instance the one between the human Jorendo Ashgard and the elven lady Ilphukiir Kurohyou, who were married by priestess Caty on the shores of the Feathermoon Stronghold with a small group of friends present. After the simple vows, an exchange of the rings, and a kiss to seal the ceremony, there was a party with food, dancing, and chatting. Jorendo (Joeri, 23, Dutch) explained that their relationship had been going on for a few months and it just felt natural to him to propose.

Jorendo: "Ilp and i played a relationship for a few months. Funny thing was that we found it more and more adorable to watch them, they where so in love and as the player behind it, it seemed we had no controll over it. They shared everything, and every minute of the day they where together. Jorendo had to ask Ilph twice before she sayd yes. The first time they had a talk about it on stranglethon beach. She wasn't ready to commit herself yet. The second time they just cleared the Death mines and where resting on the ship, they talked a bit about how they couldn't be without each other, and out of nothing Jorendo proposed, not the most romantic place to do so, but she sayd yes. The proposal went all IC without Ilph knowing OOC yet that Jorendo would ask her char." (RP Theory 101 forum, March 2007)

Weddings are considered to be both a special occasion for the dramatic conflict of the player-characters performing the couple as well as an event where other player-characters can meet and engage in different types of dramatic conflict. Weddings can be anything from a small-scale ritual consisting of just the couple and a priest to a large-scale event with many guests. The content of the ceremonies spans the spectrum between Christian and pagan, depending on the couple's race. According to the game lore, humans, for instance, believe in the "Holy Light," whereas night elves are more pagan oriented and worship the moon goddess Elune. Planning of the event often takes place in-game, as part of the role-play experience, however, e-mail, MSN, and forums are also used for arrangements and invitations. Player-characters can spend weeks or months looking for a location, commissioning a priest, deciding what to wear (although there are in-game wedding dresses and tuxedos, not every couple opts for this), writing speeches, and inviting guests.

On the RP Theory 101 forum, a player-character named Gilthas (Herman, 41, Dutch) gave some insight into the planning of his night elfen "handfasting". He had been role-playing a romance with a night elf female for quite a while already, spending time together talking 4 to 6 nights a week (mostly IC, but sometimes OOC as well), mostly the last 30 to 60 minutes before logging off for the day.

Gilthas: "We planned the event a lot like we plan any social RP event, once we had decided we would get married ("handfasted") IC. We arranged a priestess, I wrote out a ceremony, we fiddled with it until we were both satisfied, made sure the priestess knew what to do, people were invited, etc. A lot was planned and arranged through our forums (again, like any RP event). The wedding itself was moved twice, once (partly) because the Gates of Ahn'Quiraj were opened on the day, the next time because the bride had connection troubles. Once we got it started, it ran quite smooth, though.

The wedding itself was a nice way to confirm the relationship to our online friends (mostly our guild, but some others as well). It gave some nice hooks for RP to spark off. And for me it fit in with some of the things that are my prime reasons for playing (for ROLEplaying) in WoW: I like



Figure 2: The wedding between Jorendo Ashgard and Ilphukiir Kurohyou on the beach of the Feathermoon Stronghold. Priestess Caty: "These rings are the physical proof of your sworn love, joy and duty. May they be blessed in the name of Light. These rings are the proof of your vows. Moon goddess, please hear the words of two people that look up to you, and bless this union." [...] "You... have made your promises, in your own words, and they have been heard. In the name of Light, I pronounce you husband and wife."

to explore things like emotions and relations in my RP (I also like to watch romantic comedies; that might engage the same "socket")."
(RP Theory 101 forum, March 2007)

In an e-mail conversation Gilthas later explained how the handfasting was disbanded after a few months because the other player was at that point tired of playing WoW and tired of playing the romantic relationship. Furthermore he told me that his "wife's" player is a male playing a bi-sexual female character:

[...] though I only found out for sure when he announced it on our guild forums sometime after starting to play again. It never really came up as a subject in our conversations, though I did wonder (knowing the balance of male/female players from Nick Yee's research quite well) whether the player was male or female, and whether I cared.. and the answer was (and still is) that I liked the person and how he/she interacts, independent of the physical gender of that person. (e-mail conversation, March 2007)

As Gilthas' story underlines, role-play marriages or handfastings often end after a few months, sometimes due to IC reasons, other times because players find the dramatic conflict not interesting anymore. Which has an impact for both the character and the player. On the blog that Gilthas keeps of his role-play experiences he OOCly wrote "I'm feeling a little sad (the bond between them/us has been part of our WoW gaming for a long time, and held some of the best parts of my gaming experience), and a little lost in where to take Gilthas' roleplay right now." After a while our in-game discussion arrived also at this point; what happened if a player-character is turned down or dumped?

Alpha-females

Freckles and Duckular broke up for a while, mainly due to the fact that after several months, Freckles found out that her beloved was a criminal and not the president of a "legitimate" business club. Although they both found this an interesting dramatic conflict to role-play and stayed OOC friends in the meantime, Duckular wondered what would have happened if Freckles had found a new significant other.

Duckular: "When Frecks left Duckie, it didnt really affect me OOC at all.. Duckie was quite upset IC... but while they were apart, me and frecks stayed the same good friends that we've always been. I think both of us were sad deep down that the two characters were apart, but like i say, OOC we were still good friends (and i think deep down we knew they'd be back together one day)...If however frecks had been with some other gnome in the meantime, i'm not 100% sure if we'd have stayed the same friends... i'd hope we would... But it would have been... a bit more tense i guess?" (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Kalistra proposed the possibility that role-players do not want to play the role of rejected lover, even though this could lead to interesting dramatic conflicts. "I mean if there are more people interested in the same one for example - no matter how much IC this can be, still there can be friction in those situations maybe. [...] and females being sometimes more 'territorial' than males, i think this can explain also the alpha thing," she said, referring to the quote on gender and role-play (Williams et al. 2006). We talked about the quote earlier over MSN because she felt it touched on some of her own experience and her theory on women being rather dominant in role-playing as opposed male role-players. One episode from her role-play career was an especially striking example of a female player exposing competitive and aggressive behavior over a role-played romance. In the episode Kalistra had an encounter with an apparently well role-played male warlock "Zorg", mainly based on IC talking about their common profession (warlock). Soon after their meeting she received a private whisper from the player-character "Kim" who was in a relationship with Zorg, telling Kalistra to keep her hands from her lover. Kalistra considered that Kim wanted to be an alpha-female; the individual in the community whom others follow and defer to:

Kalistra: "Some time ago my char Kalistra met a warlock in a IC situation, trade square. We started talking and he looked a good PPer; we met (by chance) later and again RP started. The discussion was mainly about warlock stuff with some bantering - nothing flirtatious tho. Not at all (also because I dislike that sort of stuff). Lets call that player Zorg. Fictional name. Anyway the very same night of the second encounter, I received a OOC /w from a certain Kim (again fictional name although she would deserve to be shamed publicly) who, quite politely, started to ask OOC: 1) if I had met zorg 2) if I had flirted with him. She was stating that Zorg was her lover etc and so...'handsoff!' basically she was asking me OOC if my char had a story with Zorg.

I had met him twice for a short encounter, and that Kim was already worried, and not even tried to come to me IC, but started the /w OOC things. Which brought to me to this conclusion: 1) she - and possibly both of them, were not able to distinguish IC from OOC 2) I had no wish to meet this Zorg anymore or get involved in anything like this 3) females get and are basically... very very territorial. Even in a game. What i found sad, anyway, was not that she wanted Zorg all for herself etc but the /w ooc [I asked: she used ooc to exercise power over the story? and maybe also ooc power? in case it was not only about rp?] yes, she was using the OOC to exercise power... bad RPing.. but I have seen far worse stories, and much more unfair behavior [I inquired: what did you say to her?] I said the truth: that I didnt flirt with Zorg, and that I dont discuss such matters OOC possibly. But basically i reassured her. Since then i never met Zorg again - dunno if by coincidence or what." (MSN conversation, January 2007)

As Kalistra already noted, there were several things going on in this situation. By using an OOC whisper, Kim did not play according to the unwritten rules of role-play. She was using power-play through meta-gaming in order to make sure that her IC relationship would stay intact. This was what annoyed Kalistra a little, besides the impression that Kim, and probably Zorg as well, were unable to deal with the tension between IC and OOC. Kim's behavior could be connected to an OOC crush on Zorg, however, caution should be used with singular explanations.

Role-play in an MMORPG is always collaborative play, and in order to have the opportunity to role-play and express oneself, the player-character needs to negotiate access into social interaction and dramatic conflict. This not only requires knowledge of the formal and informal role-play rules, but also developing skills for managing the negotiation of rules and dramatic conflict in a computer-mediated role-play environment. These are social, cultural, and cognitive skills such as game mechanics, imagination, both IC and OOC social behavior, English language, typing skills, and lore knowledge. These skills have to be developed in an environment with thousands of unknown player-characters, although most players do not start from scratch but come into the game with a small social capital consisting of a group of offline friends or a players' network from another game.

As Freckles noted, "WoW is a big game, with lots of players in it. You can easily drown in all that is given." This is one reason, she argued, that role-playing a romantic relationship can be comforting, as it means there is always a player-character around who "gets you," someone with whom you enjoy role-playing. This in-game significant other can be an important reason to log on and continue playing the game. OOC romantic feelings are not necessarily part of this scenario.

Freckles: "To start the game with a friend and connect to them IC'ly is a wonderful thing as you have most of the time someone to talk with either IC or OOC. Relationships (or play with it) gives you also the opportunity to get to know one player and have someone you can count on as well I guess.. I mean it's nice in real life to have someone around that 'knows' you, or 'gets' you." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Being successful in managing role-play interaction and conflict results not only in a role-play experience but also in gaining both IC and OOC social and cultural knowledge and skills that, in turn, leads to more role-play. In instrumental play, winning leads to material reward and social capital, whereas in role-play there is sometimes more social capital to be gained by losing rather than winning the IC dramatic conflict. In other words, ending a relationship might allow for development of either more diverse role-play or role-play with more player-characters – situations that could be missed if one maintains a romance. However, this takes a player who feels secure in managing the complex negotiation processes in the MMORPG. More often, player-characters retreat to meta-gaming and power play in order to keep their status quo. This, however, often results in the opposite effect, as Kalistra's example shows, because it goes against the unwritten rules of role-play communities. I will return to

the issues of negotiating power and access in the next parts of this chapter on gamemastering and role-play communities.

Role-playing sexuality and cybersex

Even though many role-players participate in role-playing romantic relationships, romance is simultaneously an often-mocked theme in general chat channels and on the official forums. Role-players involved in IC romantic relationships are sometimes accused of an OOC interest in "zyb0ring" (cybersex) and cybersex is often used as a way to mock role-play in itself. Simultaneously WoW has been known for a high level of emergent sexual content both in-game in the form of individual cybersex and brothels and out of game in the form of machinima porn and sites such as *World of Porncraft* and *World of Whorecraft*, where either hypersexualized characters or men and women dressed up as Fantasy characters are presented as lust objects.³⁸

On a WoW RP server, the tension between role-play and sexuality revolves around two issues. The first is how much sexuality can or should be part of an IC romantic relationship, and the second issue is the contestedness of player-characters participating in sexual role-play (cybersex) for OOC pleasure or virtual rewards.

Role-players have very different ideas on how much sexuality can or should be part of a role-played romance. Some players stop at a kiss, others will role-play intercourse, while yet others will role-play a pregnancy after skipping the act by just making the agreement that they "did it." While sexuality has become an accepted and important part of theater, film, and literature, it is a contested issue in both improvisational and story-driven role-play. This is the result of the fact that the experience is not mediated by the authority of a gamemaster but has to be bracketed off by the players themselves as being pretend, which can get more difficult when the emotions involved are more intimate. Often depending on their offline love lives, players decide how far a blurring of frames is allowed to go. Role-players who include sexual explicit role-play into their dramatic conflict often make sure that this takes place in a place without other players and/or in a private chatchannel such as /party. This is more or less accepted by most players.

Duckular: "Personally, i'd say its just another type of RP... it's a bit of a dodgy one... but if the characters have reasons to do it, then thats fair enough really. BUT it should be spared from the rest of us by happening somewhere away from people, and done in /party chat... Not speaking from experience really, but i can see that it is still part of RP i guess..." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

³⁸ Recently, sex in virtual worlds has become a frequently discussed subject. Researchers are studying sexual freedom and sex crimes in the highly sexualized culture of Second Life. The second Sex in videogames conference, where researchers and designers discuss the emergent sexual content in online games as well as adult games and virtual worlds with erotic themes, was held in 2007.

Place of Birth:

Kul'Tiras

Height:

5'5" (1,68 meters)

Bust/waist/hips:

36-24-36 (90-60-90)

Motto:

„Live life to its fullest.

None of us have enough

time to waste it.

Figure 3: A shapemate from Argent Dawn player-generated (soft) porn magazine Shapes, which presented itself as “not only for men” by including not only a shapemate (screenshots of well-known female characters dressed in sexy outfits) but also a fashion report and short stories.

Furthermore there have been guilds such as *The Shadowdancers*, who made sexually expressive dancing part of their role-play and for a short while the server had its own player-generated (soft) porn magazine called *Shapes*, which presented itself as “not only for men” by including not only a shape-mate (screenshots of well-known female characters dressed in sexy outfits) but also a fashion report and short stories.

In an earlier discussion I had with Kalistra on role-play relationships, she argued that it can be fun and purposeful to role-play love stories, especially if they fit into a characters life, and to share with other players an involving experience of the game. However, if the relationship became predominant she would find it rather disturbing: “the idea of people playing just to date IC. because it may be just the antechamber of zyb0r. and if one just plays to have zyb0r, well, they should go to chat rooms or other stuff like that.”

There are indeed player-characters who role-play sexual content which is rather aimed at cybersex or deviant behavior than dramatic conflict. They often do not mind being seen by others and, in the case of deviant behavior, “being seen” is, of course, part of the grieving. Fingelsbrew: “I’ve “walked upon” some things I really wished I hadn’t seen. One certain with much blood, rape and virgins. I mean.. those things are just not fit for others to see.” This is indeed problematic because of the Entertainment Software Rating Board’s (ESRB) “T” (Teen) rating that WoW has in North America and the 12+ PEGI rating in Europe, which means that violent content is accepted but sexual content is not.³⁹ According to the harassment policy of Blizzard Entertainment, players who use clear or masked language referring to (violent) sexual acts or pornography can be temporarily or permanently banned from the game. Like violations of the role-play policy, this protocol works on the basis of peer-to-peer review, which means that players have to report each other for deviant behavior. Although many players find cybersex unacceptable with regard to the minors around, there is also a substantial number of players who accepts cybersex if they are not bothered by it. According to one rumor, some raidcommunities are in part based on cybersex, and being the lover of an officer is supposed to be a way to gain a good position in the community along with the best picks from the loot.

Two controversial examples of cybersex on *Argent Dawn* are the village of Goldshire and “brothel” guilds such as The House of Sin. The village of Goldshire is nicknamed “whoreshire” because it is known for attracting player-characters who participate in cybersex. “Sorry there is a zyb0r party a GS [Goldshire, MC]... can you do without me? feel free to state the reason in your research! :P,” joked Kalistra in raidchat as she was making her way to the in-game discussion at the Eastvale Logging Camp. Eiswein replied: “- starts running towards goldshire.” The village has become the icon for bad role-play and ridicule among many role-players. The House of Sin⁴⁰ is a guild, the members of which

39 ESRB: http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp

PEGI: <http://www.pegi.info/>

40 <http://www.guildportal.com/Guild.aspx?GuildID=141700&TabID=1204161>

provide sexual pleasure in return for payment in virtual gold: "If you are a female character that wants a job with great payment you have found the right place." The cost for "relaxing with the ladies" is between 60 silver for 5 minutes up to 4 gold for spending an hour with a "mistress." The "ladies" are all human or night elf. Other races are not considered to be very sexually attractive. A friend who role-played a belly-dancing gnome, for example, could not find a job "because her legs were too short and not sexy."

Gamemastering

Keeping role-play IC can be an effective way to avoid confusion over the interplay between person, player, and character, however, most players also communicate OOC both ingame and out-game. In an environment where the authority of one or more gamemasters over the rest of the group is not written into the formal rules of the game, players have to negotiate power among themselves. Thus, role-players decide among themselves which events can be part of the shared fantasy. While the formal and informal role-play rules suggest that OOC communication should be avoided at all costs, this is much more complex in practice. In Kalistra's example of Zorg and Kim, OOC communication was a "no-no," however, if players agree on the use of OOC talk it can also encourage role-play.

High on the playground

If an action matters to a large part of the community, such as claiming ownership over a tavern, players will often ask for permission through the official forums. This not only hinges on kindness, because WoW consists of a static virtual world in which players can only temporarily change things (such as slaying monsters that will "respawn," or resurrect, after a certain time), this agreement is also necessary for the tavern to become part of the shared fantasy in the first place.

Fingelsbrew: "I believe that all makes the story. One can always do things, such as I did, I created a tavern, but it was the people who came there who decided what should happen inside. One man can create a playground, but it's up to the kids if the toys are used as the creator intended for them to." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

By opening a tavern, Fingelsbrew created a playground where role-players knew they could find each other to enact improvised dramatic conflict. As I have shown in chapter 1, role-play is a contested style of play even on a RP server, therefore, places like The Fingels Quest and other events can be essential in finding other role-players and gaining access to role-play. Kalistra argued that the negotiation process of role-play can be understood in terms of "auto-generation." Due to the emergent properties of the system, the outcome of the process will always be different from what each of the participants had in mind.

Kalistra: "I mean that every player - in more or less creative, more or less intentional ways - throws into a big cauldron his or her RP contribution. However, the final product - the final RPing plot/event is always different from what each of the participants had in mind, as if it followed other routes, and self given rules." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Especially unwritten rules such as meta-gaming and power emoting are important in regulating the negotiation and decision-making process. Both Fingelsbrew and Freckles gave examples of the use of OOC communication that deepened their role-play experience. Fingelsbrew told us about the day that Shifte, the former president of the LBC, threw him out of the tavern where he was working at that time:

Fingelsbrew: "When Fingels was thrown out of the Blue Recluse by Shifte. we spoke oocly in whisp at the same time he did it and we had a real blast, taking the tension off the subject itself that he was ruining my character's life. But then again.. I urged him on to be even more evil to Fingels.. so I carries some of the blame as well :P Which created a very fun situation for us both, ooc. While he was Icly very angry, and Fingels very very sad and distraught." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Freckles: "I agree with you on that one Fingels, it takes tension out of heavy things and it always amazes me how my character can react while I feel the total opposite. It's great to be able to share that as well and have a good laugh about it." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Freckles' amazement over the fact that her character can react in a certain way, while she as a player feels the opposite, underlines Kalistra's idea of auto-generation. Jorendo made a similar remark in his description of the relationship he and Ilphukiir have with their characters: "Funny thing was that we found it more and more adorable to watch them, they where so in love and as the player behind it, it seemed we had no controll over it." Kalistra furthermore suggested that instead of focusing on the similarities between us and our characters, we maybe should turn our interest towards the differ-

ences. These differences, however, should not be explained as “compensations” for something we lack as players. Rather, if a player manages to let the character interact with other player-characters in the flow of the shared fantasy which is being created on the fly, a character can start to live its own life. One of the interviewees of media scholar Torill Mortensen, who studied the instrumental play and role-play in MUDs, called this experience the “role-play high”:

The role-playing high is just a pet theory of mine, which I find a lot of other roleplayers understand, and necessarily a lot of actors and writers; people who seek to achieve almost a mentality outside of their own. And it is the point at which you have stopped thinking about; Given this situation, what would my character say? Given this situation, what would my character do? - and start thinking from the point of view of your character and say what you want to say and do what you want to do. To fully immerse yourself into the character. I find that it's very enthralling. (Mortensen 2003, 164)

These experiences suggest that the interplay between person, player, and character is not as straightforward as we may think. As especially the description of Jorendo showed, the role-play high is a paradoxical combination between reflexivity and control, deep connection and losing control. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called this mental state of operation, which creates a feeling of complete immersion, “flow.” Flow is characterized by a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention, a merging between action and awareness, a distorted sense of time, a feeling of intrinsic reward, while paradoxically having a sense of personal control over the situation or activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Csikszentmihalyi discusses how this optimal experience, which is both demanding and rewarding, can be found in sport, music making, spirituality, and so on. The state of flow has often been described as a highly sensual experience which can be generated by improvisational play or emergent behavior. Violin player Stephen Nachmanovitch showed, for instance, how improvisation in all aspects of life can create flow and creativity (Nachmanovitch 1990). He called this “free play.” In a similar fashion, novelist Diane Ackerman discussed flow in terms of “deep play” (Ackerman 1999). Mortensen argued that this tension between letting go and control is at the heart of any game experience.

This combination between flow and control was also expressed by Eiswein who explained that he likes to keep his role-play IC in order to achieve a feeling of immersion, however, at the same time he likes to have an idea where to take things.

Eiswein: I always find it more interesting if one have no clue to what will happen next. But I must admit that I prefer having an idea of where to take things. Well, the best stories and the best shows are the one that aint predictable. Correct? Same with a RP story. [...] Its a tricky issue, and Ive found no solution to it, or path that I prefer. But it all depends on who you're playing with and against. (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Creating dramatic conflict

Whether role-players themselves should be able to have the authority of a traditional gamemaster in PnP role-play and LARP is a contested issue. Whereas most players enjoy being part of organized events and plots, the main worries revolve around whether the dramatic conflict is open-ended enough, in order words, whether the “gamemaster” leaves enough room for players to improvise.

Duckular and Fingelsbrew explained how they used OOC knowledge to create dramatic conflict. They emphasized that their goal is not to plan situations in detail, but to create hooks for dramatic conflict. Duckular tells us more about his dwarven watchman, Kiachideon, with whom he tries to stir up plots:

Duckular: “90% of the time, kiach is just another watchman... patrolling the streets, looking for troublemakers... or more likely skiving off in some tavern or other... However, i find it useful for stirring up plots occasionally... for both the LBC and watches benefit. I never give more information than is needed, and kiach never does much of the investigating... I just usually find a small clue, to give the investigation a nudge in the right direction... then let the rest of the watch do the rest of the investigating. This partly makes up for the fact that finding “clues” is alot harder in RP policing than in RL policing i guess... as in RL, if a clue is there, its there... but in RP, it requires someone else to emote or tell you that its there. So by finding a small clue, and allowing the watch to then work out what it means, it keeps the story flowing.” (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Some players also use alts for the creation and negotiation of dramatic conflict. When Fingelsbrew decided to end his WoW subscription he created an alt to contact a well-known villain in the role-play community. He asked the villain to murder Fingelsbrew in return for a payment of 30 gold pieces. After the villain OOC-ly made sure that Fingelsbrew wanted to have his character permanently killed, he agreed to the deal. The result was that one night, Fingelsbrew was unexpectedly taken from the world of Azeroth. Fingelsbrew underlined that he did not script the event, which made it surprising to both him and the murderers involved. Although Fingelsbrew enjoyed the event, the death was emotionally hard to take at the same time: “I killed a part of me. A part which I had worked with for almost two years.” As a form of stress relief, the players made OOC jokes after the killing. After the death of his character, Fingelsbrew created another alt, this time a detective who investigated the murder. In this way, Fingelsbrew was able to generate more role-play.

Fingelsbrew: “I didn’t script it. I just said that he should kill me on that night. Nothing more. I was extremely surprised when Kotoko gave me a rose and brought me out. I thought “omg! Fingel’s getting a girly!” Then she said “I’m sorry Fingelsbrew, this will only sting a bit.” And Yikyik and Shaevar came from the shadows and she took on her dark clothes and crossbows It was the best thing I’ve been through :) So much fun. It was so beautiful [...] And it was well worth those 30 gold they got for it :D” (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Fingelsbrew: "after I killed off Fingels and sent off Pork to an uncertain future I had 1 month left on WoW and created a new char, an investigator. Tulmer "Hammerhead" I sent out Tulmer as a small "flavour" to RP in Stormwind. He Investigated a lot of things, I started with Fingels murder and Pork's abduction. I already knew all the details, but by using him in the new form I tried to figure out what people knew, etc. I wanted to give a boost to RP in Stormwind, since there's many plots going on, but not many people attracted to. I investigated corruption in the City Watch, Trias trial, the LBC, Fingelsbrew's murder, was he a crook, etc. I had -a lot- going on." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Duckular and Fingelsbrew did not consider this stirring up of plots to be "gamemastering." Duckular: "I'm as involved in the RP as anyone else and dont know where its going either... like i say, i just give it a nudge." Instead, they consider a gamemaster to be a player who pre-scripts the unfolding of events. Fingelsbrew underlined that this is not easy in a heavily populated, computer-mediated environment such as WoW: "The more people the larger risk they won't react the way you "wanted" them to." In reply, I asked Fingelsbrew whether he considered the caravan of the Argent Archives to be gamemastered.

Fingelsbrew: "We will walk from here to there. That's not gamemastering. The parts where he [Eiswein, MC] began emoting things happening, was gamemastering, but the march itself was merely a journey. People could walk and leave as they wanted. [...] It wasn't hardcore gamemastering. It was just.. small things." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

A few days after the in-game discussion, I talked about gamemastering on MSN with Eiswein. He has quite some experience in creating improvisational conflicts, event conflicts, and story-driven conflicts, not only in WoW but in PnP RPGs as well. To my question as to whether he considers himself to be a gamemaster, he replied: "I got no control of the game. Im merely a player who wishes to be one." In his view, a "real gamemaster" should be able to control the virtual environment, whereas as he is "only" able to influence social interaction.

Eiswein: "A GameMaster should be able to create storylines, put out clues, spawn enemies, NPCs, etc I see why Gms cant do that in Warcraft really, since Metzen [Chris Metzen, the lead creative developer of the Warcraft universe, MC] want his universe to be his universe but minor stuff, such as spawning an ambush, or some party guests/Inn-patrons.. etc.. would bring so much life to the world" (MSN conversation, January 2007)

He continued, explaining how he created and negotiated dramatic conflict with Nath Shadoweyes, the night elf with whom he founded the *Stormwind City Watch*, a successful “hardcore” role-play guild:

Eiswein: “Do I Gamemaster with Nath. Yes and No. I try to bring something into others stories. But Im also enjoying myself at the same time. Yes: (Earlier) Nath had a role and a purpose. He was to be a corrupt city guard captain Which brought life to other players since he 1. recruited. 2. patrolled. 3. arranged meetings (with other guilds, plus within the guild) 4. yelled the time 5. made the book of laws 6. conducted arrests etc etc Things that brings the world to life, more than everlasting NPCs doing the same chores over and over What makes that enjoyable for me? Ive always been a Gamemaster. I love creating worlds, systems (not dice stuff. But .. just.. systems.. how things works etc), stories When people come up to me and tell me “Wow, that was more fun than Ive had for years” .. then its worth it It makes me feel good” (MSN conversation, January 2007)

As Eiswein’s description shows, his gamemastering is based on coherently simulating a situation (in this case, a police force) and creating hooks for dramatic conflict within this context. He does not create a story for players to experience, rather, he meshes his own stories (both of characters and guilds) with the world of Azeroth and thus hosts a lively environment in which players are encouraged to role-play. The memories that player-characters have of their improvised role-play experiences become the stories of the community.

Winning and losing dramatic conflict

Role-play is often considered to be a form of play which cannot be won or lost: “[...] there are never really “winners” or “endings” in RPGs. Rather, the players are interested in experiencing a good story, but also improving their character’s strengths and diminishing their weaknesses, thereby allowing them to experience grander and more epic stories” (Williams et al. 2006, 4). Apart from the fact that I do not consider role-play in itself to be storytelling, winning and endings can be part of the experience. Fingelsbrew’s death illustrated an ending in role-play; also, both IC and OOC winning and losing can be an issue, as the example of Zorg and Kim showed.

Kalistra argued that this was not the only time she was confronted with power play or competition through meta-gaming: “I noticed that many times people resort to OOC /w [private whisper, MC] when they see their situation in danger. sometimes they resort to those for mocking you when they are ‘winning’.” Also, she added, there are players who take pleasure in annoying other players: “Immature players of this kind will only aggravate in silly way (OOO in /say, PvP rampage etc) while more intelligent troublemakers will try to get against you or the community in more subtle ways.” As examples she mentioned unfairness in plots, or alts and player-characters who hijack events:

Kalistra: "I personally think that sometimes people are not very fair in their playing. the unfair use of alts for example is a well known pet -hate of mine. lets suppose that someone has a char in the watch and a char in a gang who is in competition with another gang... well in this case if the player usues his watch alt to damage the opposite gang... especially if without asking OOC (in this case it would be a good idea) that would be very unfair to my eyes. there are ppl who uses alt to pump up their main stories in an unfair ways. I disagree with that, although there are not written rules. so it's a personal matter of fairness and style i think." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

The reason why players use alts to pump up either their main character or the dramatic conflict the character is involved in has to do with the fact that they want to be in the spotlight. In his role-play survey, Yee distinguished between three character tropes that most role-players despise because they are on the outer ends of the spectrum of the tragic character: the "drama queen," the "ultra villain," and the "ultra hero" (Yee 2006). Players consider these type of characters to be static, because the player has already decided on the extreme traits of the character. Players who resort to these type of characters are often considered to be immature or unexperienced role-players. The only way to get a very tragic, evil, or heroic character accepted by other players is to develop these characteristics over time, through interaction with other players. According to Eiswein, deviant behavior can lead to exclusion from both the IC and OOC role-play communities. He underlined that winning and losing should happen IC:

Eiswein: "Winning and losing happens IC. OOC everyone should enjoy the experience. That is why I feel its important to give and take when you roleplay in a community like this. Sometimes youre ahead, sometimes youre behind. If you always insist on being the superior you will lose friends quickly. [...] Through my various characters Ive experienced lots of alts coming up to me, describing other characters (their own) as.. lets say: important nobles, infamous criminals, etc etc. This to me, is no good. If the community itself isnt aware of the villain/noble/famous person, whatever, then the relationship only exists in the mind of the character and the few he tells this to." (in-game discussion, January 2007)

As I discussed earlier, in this way losing IC can lead to successful role-play and a gain in social capital. Besides an interesting experience and sometimes peer-to-peer material rewards (the Snap Sisters, for instance, receive payment for some photo shoots), the main reward that role-players in WoW receive. Fingelsbrew illustrated how IC losing can be more fun and socially rewarding than winning. Through losing, Fingelsbrew successfully managed to become an actor in a large network of players (in this case, a "huge guild of assassins"). In turn, the social capital built up through role-play gave him an advantage in being successful in instrumental play, as the assassins helped him to "level up to level 59 in a jiffy."

Fingelsbrew: "I think that it's more fun losing really. It might be because not many like to do it. So both ends are happy, but you often gain much more by doing it. For example. My mage Pork, i accidentally ran upon a murder going on in the tower of Azora. They didn't want any witnesses, and thus I had to run for my life. pork as it is, is a very unstable child :P But she caught up with me, broke his arm and later beat the living hell out of him. I kept going with the duels, maybe 20 times :P She was a much higher level, so she won of course But after that, having Pork crawling bloody towards the road. I met a low level warrior who helped me to Goldshire where his "mom" came to pick him up. That made Pork have a personal vendetta against that lady, and gave him issues against specific tabards, guilds, people, priests, etc. I gained alot of RP-possibilities from that. And I got to be the target for a -huge- guild of assassins. Which they were part of :P Which was very interesting itself. It made me level up to 59 in a jiffy :P" (in-game discussion, January 2007)

In a similar fashion, Mortensen argued that the ideal state of flow and control in role-play was not necessarily achieved by holding the most powerful position (like that of a traditional gamemaster or a powerful player-character), but by acquiring a dramatic position with high potential.

Playing a character was entertaining as long as there was enough insecurity to keep the player alert, observant and creative. The character also had to possess adequate experience and influence, so that the player wouldn't feel powerless, but not so much influence that the consequences of each action were more than the player could cope with. (Mortensen 2003, 262)

Role-Play Communities

As the examples in this chapter have illustrated, in order to role-play, a player-character needs to be able to negotiate access into social interaction and dramatic conflict. In the distributed social network of the MMORPG, the power structure revolves around a process of inclusion and exclusion, in other words, players cannot take power, power has to be negotiated in the interplay between person, player, and character. In the last part of this chapter, I focus on this process of role-play inclusion and exclusion in relation to social capital and the shaping of role-play communities.

Role-play inclusion and exclusion

With regard to inclusion and exclusion, Zoe (Freckles) told us an experience she had with her night elf Kilaomi. In the situation she described, Kilaomi walked by a house in Stormwind when she "overheard" (she could read the chat) a conversation that was taking place inside between Archivar Eiswein and the criminal gnome Shifté. Standing outside was another player-character (Dugald) who also seemed

to be listening to the conversation as well. It seemed that Eiswein was being threatened and because Kilaomi knew Eiswein IC, she emoted how Kilaomi listened at the door in order to gain access into the dramatic conflict and possibly help Eiswein out of his uncomfortable situation. To her disappointment, Kilaomi did not manage to gain access into the conflict by making use of emotes and chat.

Freckles: "I was completely ignored by the rogue [Dugald, MC] outside who was standing watch and who didn't bother to let me know while I was standing outside waiting for the door to be opened how he got inside and freed Eiswein. I asked him about it and he said something along the lines like he was going mad with whispers and he emoted how he got outside the first time and didn't bother to emote how he came back again. But as I was passing I didn't know that. Now I know it's difficult in those kinds of situations, but I felt excluded as I wasn't the famous person...right then. Someone of the watch [the Stormwind City Watch, MC] got there and was immediately involved. I felt the situation was also scripted a bit/ or handled in whispers?" (in-game discussion, January 2007)

Counter to her gnome photographer Freckles, her night elf Kilaomi is not very well known in the role-play communities. Furthermore, most players do not know that the player behind Freckles also performs Kilaomi. Role-players tend to call these situations "bubble role-play," in which they feel they cannot gain access into the dramatic conflict because they are unknown to the "clique" of participating player-characters or because the event is pre-scripted. In order to gain more insight into the situation I discussed it afterwards with Eiswein. I asked whether the event was pre-scripted and why Kilaomi could not gain access. Eiswein explained that the situation grew out of improvised conflict. He was about to leave Stormwind by gryphon, when Dugald approached him and started chatting:

Eiswein: "Shifte caught on to the situation and interrupted us. Shifte tricked Dugald into stepping too close to the...hmm...edge (gryphonplace) and pushed him into the big moat that surrounds Stormwind. then he took Eiswein hostage to a house in trade district it was the most lovely situation Ive had for a long time. but it was due to me letting myself be kidnapped, and Dugald accepting being pushed over the edge. Hahaha, when he returned later he was all wet and fish were jumping out of his shoes. Priceless!" (MSN conversation, January 2007)

As a result, Eiswein found himself captured in a house, where Shifte tied him to a chair and started threatening him. Meanwhile Kilaomi and Dugald stood outside, listening to Eiswein's cries for help. Because "enter-able" virtual houses in Azeroth do not have doors, Kilaomi could just have walked in. However, she didn't consider this to be coherent and instead used chat and emotes to try to gain IC permission to enter the scene. Dugald ignored both Kilaomi and these unwritten rules and simply entered the house through a window, without emoting his actions. This left Kilaomi standing outside, while Dugald saved Eiswein. Within a few minutes, members of the Stormwind City Watch arrived and took care of the incident, but also ignored Kilaomi who, in the meantime, had walked into the house.

Through whispers she vented her disappointment to Duckular: "bah enough with Rp'ing with Kila, let's kill." In hindsight, Eiswein felt Zoe (Freckles) was right. Dugald or Carinia (the current leader of the Stormwind City Watch) should have accommodated role-play for Kilaomi: "Carinia, I feel should have closed of the scene, interviewed Kilaomi (or tell her to seek out a watchman). She could also have made Kila escort Eis to a healer for example." He explained that from an IC perspective it would not have been coherent if either he or Shifte had invited Kilaomi into the conflict: "Eis was furious, thats why he didnt adress Kila." However, he also argued that Kilaomi could have done more to become involved: "In that particular case I feel Kila, in order to gain the most out of the situation could have for example: Be the onlooker. When a crime happens, people often come and watch or Arrange a search party for the criminal, sponsored by Carinia." He underlined the importance of role-playing an audience, as not everyone can be always directly involved in the dramatic action: "Its a part of the game in the way that people feel important. They are the centre of attention trials, weddings, executions etc it puts a few people on the spot, but requires onlookers in order to be a real event." few people on the spot, but requires onlookers in order to be a real event." Later he also added that it is often practically impossible for everyone to participate in everything. "Once you have more than four players in a conversation it becomes really really hard to keep track of the conversation/text etc."

Role-play fame

Freckles' examples underlined how complicated the social interaction process of dramatic conflict can be. Furthermore, Freckles points us to an important factor in the process, which is "role-play fame," in order words, the IC and/or OOC social capital that already has been gained in the community. Famous player-characters will be approached for role-play, whereas unknown player-characters have to gain access to role-play. In his thesis, Jonte (Fingelsbrew) wrote about the experience of the growing fame of his character.

One day when I was walking down the road in Stormwind in my tuxedo, as usual, I was hailed by an other player, he started the conversation with "Hey! You're Fingels, right?", we had a nice little chat and he told me that he was honoured to meet such a famous person as myself. I told him that I wasn't famous at all and that I was

just a commoner, just as everyone else, we parted ways shortly after that. After that more and more people stopped me and wished to speak to me, just to have spoken to me, or sent me tells how they admired my role-playing capacity. I really started laughing when I was searching for a group to do a very hard quest and I got a message from one person who asked if I were the Fingelsbrew. I said yes, and then he asked again; “Are you THE Fingelsbrew, the one with Fingels Quest? The creator of it?” I answered yes again and told him that it was nothing special with me, the following 10 minutes he spoke about how cool it was to be speaking to me. That’s when I really started wondering what was going on and if I really were that “famous.” (From 2006, 108)

As Jonte’s description showed, role-play fame can be both IC and OOC and through social capital gathered from role-play a player can also have an advantage in instrumental play. Role-play fame is often not only gained in-game but also through forums. Fingelsbrew: “we all notice people on the forums and if they’re ingame we might respect or dislike them more or less for what they did on the forums. I doubt there’s any way of escaping that.”

Zoe (Freckles) intentionally tried to keep her characters separate in order to make it easier for herself to play different characters and prevent others from confusing them. However, this means she has to build up social capital for each character and she does not gain more social capital as a player from the accumulation of being known for playing the different characters. Eiswein, on the other hand, does make use of the fame of his different characters by openly connecting them to himself as a player. This way every new character he role-plays soon reaches a visible status in the IC communities. As Fingelsbrew notes, fame can also be negative fame, players who act in an unacceptable manner on the forums can have their characters IC-ly ignored because of their behavior as a player.

Role-play communities change over time

In their guide to developing online games, Jessica Mulligan and Bridgette Patrovsky sketch four phases that players go through when playing MMORPGs. During the first phase (<1 month) they consider players to be confused about how the game works; however, if players receive guidance, especially human guidance, then during this phase “chances are very good that he/she will become ‘hooked’ and move on to the next phase.”

<p>Confusion < 1 month</p>	<p>New players often don’t read documentation or do online research on how to get the most out of a game, so when they enter the game for the first time, there is an element of confusion about how the interface works and what actions to perform to advance their character’s skills, weaponry, money and so forth.</p> <p>If the new player receives human guidance quickly, chances are very good that he/she will become “hooked” and move on to the next phase.</p>
<p>Excitement 2-4 months</p>	<p>The player is primarily there for the game, as he/she now understands how it works and how to advance within it. At this time, he/she is also making more personal, societal contacts and learning more about the background story of the game.</p> <p>If the player makes sufficient community contacts (joins a guild or team, or as a regular group of in-game friends he/she plays with), he/she will generally move onto the next phase.</p>
<p>Involvement 4 months to 4+ years</p>	<p>This is the longest subscription period of the player lifecycle and is hinged on community involvement. If the player becomes attached to an in-game mirco-community (guild, team, what have you), that micro-community generally becomes involved in the meta-functions of the game, such as an ongoing story plot, holding team events, and so forth. Players who move into the involvement phase normally subscribe to the game for a period of years.</p>
<p>Boredom 2 to 4 months</p>	<p>At some point, all players will become bored with a game, regardless of the strength of the community. If they cannot be recaptured through new content or features, they generally churn out within two or four months of boredom setting in.</p>

Table 1: The four phases of play sketched by Jessica Mulligan and Bridgette Patrovsky (2003 , 133-135).

This second phase (2-4 months) is characterized by a feeling of excitement, as the player now understands how to play the game and starts to build a social network. If this network is strong enough, Mulligan and Patrovksy expect a player to move on to the next phase, "involvement," which results in players who subscribe to a game for a period of months or years. During each phase, players can become bored with the game; however, in the phase of involvement, their social networks often keep them in the game for a few months longer before they leave (see table 1).

Once an MMORPG server has existed over a period of time, a patchwork of social networks comes into being. In the case of the WoW RP server Argent Dawn, there are both instrumental and role-play networks that overlap in many ways. Over time the atmosphere on the server changed, roughly according to the same pattern that Mulligan and Patrovksy sketch for individual players. In the first two phases, "confusion" and "excitement," players were fascinated by the instrumental and role-play possibilities of the game, and together they established unwritten role-play rules and conventions on how to create and negotiate dramatic conflict. In the third phase, "involvement," a large group of players became bored with role-play. An often-mentioned reason was that they could not have any effect on the static virtual world, which means that their role-play experiences had to be kept alive by the social memory of the community. These players either left the game or turned to instrumental play. Duckular: "AD has changed... those who were here a year ago and RPing, many of them have achieved level 60 with one character or another, and many have been converted to raiding." After a few months, discussions started on how to bring back role-play to the server. Kalistra compared the server's life cycle developments with that of a school class:

Kalistra: 'Its like when you are at the end of some school course, a class with all the same people. at the beginning social things are bursting, but the last year whatever had to happen has happened already and ppl are drifting away... i dunno if its clear. people have already been kidnapped, had children, marriages, trials, etc etc difficult to find new stuff. but expansion may relaunch things.' (in-game discussion, January 2007)

The server was in this third phase when an expansion to the game was released in February 2007. This included two new races and new parts of the world to explore. As a result, some players who had left the game returned, and active role-play communities evolved around these new features. These communities were largely based on already-established social networks. However, this patchwork of networks is far from static; guilds and in-game friendships continue to change rapidly. Dramatic conflict and negotiation over rules keep the world in a constant struggle. Also, as Freckles and I showed with the Snap Sisters, player-characters can become highly visible very quickly. We did this through both daily in-game interactions and forum announcements. The forum can be crucial for player-characters to find and gain access to role-play. The reason for this is that player-characters who are already part of social networks mainly role-play with characters they already know. In turn this strengthens the social capital of their own guild and in-game friends. Thus, the forum, where players post guild information,

event announcements, and stories from dramatic conflict, can be a way for new player-characters to find out about in-game social interactions.

Bridging social capital

Some player-characters such as Kiachideon and the detective Tulmer “Hammerhead” make an effort try to spread stories in-game from previous role-play experiences. Thus they are not only able to tie the different role-play communities together, they also encourage “disconnected” player-characters to role-play. This is also what Kalistra tries to accomplish in-game and out of game with *The Azeroth Portrayer*, the goal that Eiswein has in mind with the Argent Archives caravans and webportal, and what Freckles and I aimed for with the Snap Sisters. These are all ways to host role-play by bridging social networks and creating a collective memory, however, as Kalistra noted: “I started Kalistras chronicles just to make some stories more known for everybody to enjoy. But ultimately it depends on the players, and their imagination.”

In her study of pretend play by preschool girls, Amy Sheldon suggested that pretend play has an important function in developing social, linguistic, and cognitive skills for managing everyday conflict in social interaction (Sheldon 1996). Whereas there are many differences between children’s pretend play and Fantasy role-play by teenagers and adults, I argue that further research into the connection between role-play and pretend play may be useful in gaining more insight into the development of conflict negotiation skills throughout life. Both in MMORPG play and in daily life, the development of conflict negotiation skills are essential in gaining access to both social and cultural capital. While the habits of an individual determine the basic social network, this is further developed through (playful) social interaction and conflict negotiation.

In the previous chapter I argued that, while we can understand MMORPGs as examples of social interaction, we should simultaneously understand them as deeply tied in with our daily realities. Through role-play, player-characters create IC bonds as well as OOC, out of game, and offline interpersonal relationships. Successful role-players not only strengthen what political scientist Robert Putnam defined as “bonding social capital,” or networks between homogeneous groups of people, they also contribute to “bridging social capital,” or the strengthening of social networks between socially heterogeneous groups. Putnam argued that bridging social capital is especially essential for the development of societies, governments, individuals, and communities (Putnam 2000). Counter to Putnam’s suggestion that the last fifty years have seen an overall decline of social capital, especially in American society, my description and analysis of role-play in WoW illustrates the opposite.

My bonding with Freckles, and our bridging of social connections between, for example, Duckular, Eiswein, Fingelsbrew, and Kalistra, broadened not only our role-play experiences but also our OOC social and cultural capital. Let us return for a moment to Zoe, who was sitting at my dinner table text messaging with Duck. Through their unlikely friendship, they discover both the similarities and differences between their lives and exchange social capital. While going about their own lives, they can at times

listen to each other rant, give advice, and talk about their (daily) lives and events that are occurring, both in WoW and outside of it.

In a similar way, my research is the product of both bonding and bridging. The many conversations I have had with Zoe about our role-play experiences have helped me to understand how online role-play and intense computer-mediated communication changed our offline perceptions of each other. It broadened my thinking on the various ways in which we mediate our experience and are able to know each other and develop in a networked society. Furthermore, the OOC conversations I first started with Eiswein and later with other players created many unexpected cultural bridges with players who were located far and near. They not only helped me to understand online role-play from many different perspectives; through their different sociocultural positions, I was also able to reflect on my own situatedness as a middle-class, white, female role-player and researcher in the Netherlands. Especially Eiswein's reflections on my thoughts and writings in the form of anecdotes, discussions, and associations, combined with the discussions I had with Zoe, made me reconsider the interplay between play, research, education, and design. It inspired me to understand networkedness both on the level of role-play and on the level of the study, and the implications of this research itself. While many unlikely and inspiring relations grow from MMORPGs, there is simultaneously much tension and confusion between players, caused by the fact that their relations are mediated by both the game and online communication tools in general. After reading how I related bonding and bridging social capital to MMORPGs, Kalistra underlined she felt that MMORPGs can also create illusionary ties between people as they believe they know each other much more than they really do.

Kalistra: "From this illusionary perspective a lot of disappointments can come, from the most trivial – Kewl d00ds complaining about their "WoW buddies" spoiling an event because they failed to attend, even without giving notice – to more touchy things – for example people spreading true or false rumors about other people RL, and nasty things like these." (Kalistra, comments on this text, March 2007)

MMORPG culture and communication is an object on the move. For now, both players and researchers are still struggling to deal with social ties and networks that are mediated in many different ways. sociocultural bonding and bridging are not a unique feature of MMORPGs, it has been a subject of research since the beginning of online communication. However, I argue that online (Fantasy) role-play does add something to the mix that is different from other forms of online communication. Because role-players are consciously playing with roles while creating and negotiating rules and dramatic conflict, they develop strong, intimate ties. Managing these ties, both IC and OOC, in-game and out of game, online and offline, allows players to develop many social, cultural, and cognitive skills.

I noticed a similar effect, for instance, in a Master-level course I developed at Utrecht University on virtual worlds and online games. The course involves studying these games and the ways in which they are played in a sociocultural context. The students are encouraged to deal with a bricolage of different research methods and theories in order to discuss the relationship between the play,

research, and design of these games in relation to society. In order to gain in-depth understanding of online games, we have been participating together in instrumental play and role-play in WoW. Being confronted with each other in unusual ways through improvised dramatic conflict, students developed a strong bonding both online and offline. In turn, I used the concepts of play and improvisation to structure the course on the fly, according to the needs and developments of the group. The result were enthusiastic classes that were inclined to collaborate, which in turn allowed more peer-to-peer encouragement, through which they developed their academic skills. This is why I propose that, with regard to online learning, we need to go “beyond the magic circle,” precisely due to the fact that when students were confronted with the interplay between person, player, and character, between online and offline, it was possible for them to reflect and create a powerful experience. As Richard Bartle, designer of the first MUD, stated (correctly, in my opinion):

Anyone who constructs a virtual world to be a utopia is missing the point. It's the real world that should be a utopia, not some virtual world. By changing people for the better through their experience of virtual worlds, the real world becomes a slightly better place. It's a drop in the ocean, but lots of drops make an ocean. (Bartle 2005)

Conclusions

In this chapter I used a network perspective to understand how role-players create and negotiate dramatic conflict in an MMORPG. I focused on three themes: role-playing romantic relationships, gamemastering, and role-play communities. I argued that we need to understand the complexity of these themes in the context of the interplay between the frames of person, player, and character. Role-players create and negotiate two types of dramatic conflict: improvised conflict and story-driven conflict, which can run from open-ended to pre-scripted. Furthermore, role-players often organize events that (loosely) fit into the lore of Azeroth.

Role-play in an MMORPG is always collaborative play, thus, in order to have the opportunity to role-play and express oneself, the player-character needs to negotiate access to social interaction and dramatic conflict. This requires

not only knowledge of the formal and informal role-play rules, but also skills for managing the negotiation of rules and dramatic conflict in a computer-mediated role-play environment. These are social, cultural, and cognitive skills such as game mechanics, imagination, both IC and OOC social behavior, English language, typing skills, and lore knowledge. Due to the lack of a traditional gamemaster and the fact that role-play is not embedded in the code of the game, role-players have to negotiate both the formal rules (role-play policies) and the informal rules of role-play among themselves.

These skills have to be developed in an environment with thousands of unknown player-characters; most players, however, do not “start from scratch” but instead come into the game with a small social capital consisting of a group of offline friends or a players network from another game. Being successful at managing role-play interaction and conflict results in a role-play experience as well as in gaining both IC and OOC social and cultural knowledge and skills which, in turn, leads to more role-play. Whereas in instrumental play winning leads to material reward and social capital, in role-play there is sometimes more social capital to be gained by losing than by winning an IC dramatic conflict.

Role-played romantic relationships are often the result of improvised conflict. Players argued that role-playing a romantic relationship is part of a successful “alternative real life” and makes the Fantasy world more “real.” Thus, as much as being single is a contested issue in our “real life” (in this case, European society), it is also an issue in the Fantasy world of Azeroth. While the conflict of role-played

love affairs can indeed lead to interesting role-play experiences, it can also be a source of conflicting feelings over the relation between person, player, and character, which players describe as the tension between IC and OOC. The tension is solved by either bracketing off of OOC or by using humor in the blending between person, player, and character. As the discussion on alpha-females showed, players sometimes resort to OOC power play in order to gain IC succes.

The negotiation process of role-play can be understood in terms of “auto-generation” or emergence that can generate a “role-play high” or a feeling of flow. Flow is characterized by a combination of letting go and being in control. Being succesful in creating dramatic conflict in WoW (game-mastering) is not so much pre-scripted and story-driven, but is instead based on coherently simulating a situation and creating hooks for dramatic conflict within this context. Duckular, Fingelsbrew, and Eiswein did not create a story for players to experience, rather, they meshed their own stories with the world of Azeroth and thus hosted a lively environment in which players are encouraged to role-play. The memories that player-characters have of their improvised role-play experiences become the stories of the community.

Once an MMORPG server has existed for a number of months or years, a patchwork of social networks comes into being. However, this patchwork of networks is far from static; guilds and in-game friendships can change quickly. Dramatic conflict and negotiation over rules keep the world in a constant struggle. The official forum can be crucial for player-characters to find and gain access to role-play. The reason for this is that player-characters who are already part of social networks mainly role-play with characters they already know. In turn, this strengthens the social capital of their own guild and in-game friends. Thus, the forum, where players post guild information, event announcements, and stories from dramatic conflicts, can be a way for new player-characters to find out about in-game social interactions.

While we can understand MMORPGs as examples of social interaction, we should simultaneously go “beyond the magic circle” in order to understand them as deeply tied in with our daily realities. Through role-play, player-characters not only create IC bonds but also OOC, out-game, and offline interpersonal relationships. Capable role-players succeed in strengthen-

ing social capital both through “bonding” and “bridging” social capital. sociocultural bonding and bridging is not a unique feature of MMORPGs, it has been a subject of research since the beginning of online communication. However, I argue that because online role-players are consciously playing with roles while creating and negotiation rules and dramatic conflict, they develop intimate and often strong ties, unlike in other forms of online communication.