Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this thesis has been to lend scientific credibility to a networked understanding of online role-play, not only because this "rather small, perhaps trivial, social world" is interesting in itself, but also because the object and type of study tells us more about the interplay between collaborative play, game design, and research in the network society. A network perspective allows us to understand the role-play game mode as a highly contested and negotiated form of play. It's precisely these characteristics that make an analysis of role-play very useful in questioning the networked systems in which it operates.

Following on my hypothesis, I argued in chapter 3 that we need to go "beyond the magic circle" in order to gain a networked understanding of play from a situated perspective in which play, design, and research are all ultimately part of the same experience.

I present the conclusions of this thesis in relation to the three goals that I formulated in the introduction: 1) to contribute to an understanding of online role-playing games as networks that interact with daily life, Fantasy game culture and the broader technological and sociocultural developments over the last thirty years; 2) to describe and analyze role-play as a specific MMORPG play style that is characterized by its negotiation principles, and thus to understand the roles, conventions, identities, and interpersonal relationships that self-proclaimed role-players negotiate in and through the systems of a commercially distributed game; and 3) to show how collaborative play, design, and game research are closely intertwined and what the implications of this are for game research.

Beyond the Magic Circle

Currently, game research is characterized by the (re)construction of contested boundaries of the "magic circle" of the game experience and the "ivory tower" of academic game research. I proposed that we go beyond the concept of the magic circle because it refers to an preexisting artificiality of the game space, which, combined with the strong metaphor, creates a dichotomy between the real and the imaginary that hides the ambiguity and complexity of actual games and play. In a similar vein, I have

shown that we also need to go beyond the concept of the ivory tower, because it refers to a preexisting status of academia, again, which, combined with the strong metaphor, creates another dichotomy between "inside" and "outside" academia that hides the complexity of the actual relationship between the roles of researchers, designers, and players.

A Network Perspective on MMORPGs

In chapter 3 I argued that we need to understand Huizinga's definition of play in the context of the overarching argument that he makes in his book, *Homo Ludens*: "civilizations arise and unfold in play and as play." Huizinga did not focus on games or the play element in culture, he set out to understand the play element of culture; how cultural practices such as law, war, science, poetry, philosophy, and art come into being through what he called in Dutch *ludieke* features, play-like processes. A focus on the play element of culture is crucial in understanding the paradox that lies in Huizinga's definition of play. He argued that play as a cultural phenomenon has boundaries of time and space, however, at the same time, it is an important part of daily life.

Thus play is not disconnected or trivial in regard to other sectors of life, but serious business, as this is how we generate culture. Huizinga studied the playful processes through which culture and society are continually (re)negotiated. The network perspective of this thesis contributed to a further understanding of these processes.

As I have shown in chapter 1, a network perspective gives us insight into the ways in which MMORPGs are connected with Fantasy game culture. The emergence of this culture ties in with the societal changes that Castells termed the network society. Analogue Fantasy role-playing games expressed many of the countercultural values that developed from the 1960s onwards and that greatly influenced

the first wave of information technology designers who, in turn, digitalized their favorite games. A network perspective also makes it possible to understand how the tensions between instrumental play and role-play in MMORPGs go back to the code and culture of previous analogue and digital role-playing games. Even though *Dungeons and Dragons* emerged from a blend of wargames, educational role-play, and Fantasy, most role-playing games are based on instrumental play. As I have shown, this is due to the fact that instrumental play lends itself to being captured in analogue and digital game systems, and because many designers of role-playing games have a preference for score-based play. Fantasy is built into the representational level of the game, whereas role-play, which is hard to capture into a system, mostly relies on meta-game rules. The result is that players have to negotiate role-play among themselves.

Role-Play in MMORPGs

Role-play in online role-playing games is often analyzed as a form of interactive narrative or performance. Although my study of role-play in *World of Warcraft* does not argue against the idea of role-play being a performance or consisting of narrative elements, I proposed consider role-playing games in the first place as "systems of social interaction".

In order to gain a better understanding of what drives this process in which performance and narrative are continually (re)constructed, I focused on the power structure of role-play; conflict and negotiation.

As I have shown in the description and analysis of role-play on the European WoW server *Argent Dawn* (chapters 2 and 4), role-play in this commercial MMORPG consists of constructing a shared fantasy through the negotiation of instrumental and dramatic conflict between players (human actors) and the system of the game (nonhuman actors). This process is not confined by the so called "magic circle" of the game, but is negotiated over the imagined boundaries of game and nongame, real and imaginary, online and offline. What is being negotiated are not only in-character roles and narratives, but also out-of-character identities and interpersonal relationships as well as the conventions or rules of the conflict and negotiation process itself.

Collaborative Play and Research

It is common practice in game research that scholars become players in order to gain an understanding of actual play. Whereas during play, scholars aim to be players "just like everyone else," in the academic output of the research, they textually construct both a players-identity as well as a transcendental outside position. By "othering" other players, game researchers lend authority to their own voice over the discussions and theorizations of players and designers.

Although I do not wish to argue against the reflective capabilities of scholars, I proposed to understand the researcher and his or her research as being situated both in networks of research *and* play. There is no outsider position possible.

The thick description of my participation and research of the the Argent Archives caravan in chapter 2 illustrated how role-play and research are intertwined practices that influence each other. Besides the Fantasy characters, I enact, my role as a researcher is either implicitly or explicitly part of the negotiation processes in which I participate. Furthermore, I argued in chapter 3 that players actively discuss and theorize their own play experience. They theorize in order to understand and negotiate play, to improve play by modifying games and designing independent games, and also to construct collective identities. From the perspective that there is no outsider position possible in ethnographies of online role-play, I argued we should not think in terms of *us* "observing" and "analyzing" *them*. In the context of MMORPGs, the power structure between scholar and informer changed from hierarchical to networked. As academics become players, they can play both the traditional roles of scholar and informer. Chapter 4 showed how a blending of insights from scholars and players leads to understanding of the ambiguity and complexities of online role-play.

In what follows, a discussion of the implications of my research, I will further consider the ways in which collaborative play, design and research are negotiated.

Implications

For the humanities, the implications of my research are that MMORPGs are important objects and cultures of study. They are cultural products that, in line with the practices of cultural studies, should be understood in the networked contexts in which they are negotiated. A network perspective allows for an understanding of the processes between human and nonhuman actors. Because code and culture interact, technological knowledge is required.

The implications of my research for informatics or the computing sciences are that in order to understand the workings of technology we need to understand the interrelations between technology and actual use and play. Thus, interdisciplinarity should not only mean collaboration between the humanities and social sciences but also with information and computing sciences. However, collaboration between the humanities and sciences has been, and still is, contested.

In his now classical formulation, Charles Percy Snow worded the tension between the humanities and science in terms of the "two cultures" problem. In his 1959 essay, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, he argued that the breakdown of communication between the two cultures was a major hindrance in solving the world's problems.

According to Snow, the right application of technology would be the solution to many problems. The mutual suspicion and incomprehension between the two cultures, which meant, for him, a polarization between "literary intellectuals" and the "natural sciences," had damaging consequences. A few years later in a follow-up essay, he argued that a "third culture" should emerge in which the literary intellectuals were on speaking terms with the scientists. Science should let itself be informed by the knowledge of the humanities (Snow 1963). In the 1990s, John Brockman expanded on the idea of Snow in a very different direction. Snow also talked about science conversing with the general public. Snow argued that during the 1930s, literary scientists started referring to themselves as intellectuals, who brought

their work to the general public. Brockman borrowed Snow's "third culture" phrase to start a "counter-organization" of scientists who communicate directly with the general public. The Edge Foundation was established in 1988 as an outgrowth of a group known as The Reality Club. "Literary intellectuals are not communicating with scientists. Scientists are communicating directly with the general public" Brockman stated, thus only limiting the gap between science and society and not between the different disciplines (Brockman 1991).

We need to understand the concept of the two cultures in the context of its time, however; as Brockman's bracketing off of science and society versus the humanities shows, Snow's main concern is still relevant: "The polarisation is a sheer loss to us all. To us as people, and to our society. It is at the same time practical and intellectual and creative loss, and I repeat that it is false to imagine that those three considerations are clearly separable (Snow 1959, 11). Nowadays we see more subdisciplines as well as an increase in interdisciplinary endeavors, and there are more and more academics working in categories that could not be defined as either humanities or sciences. Through specialization is necessary in order to gather data and bring out the details of the field and to shape a collective identity for scholars, I believe we simultaneously need to go beyond a breakdown of knowledge into departments and specializations. Furthermore, we need to bypass the idea that technology alone is what changes our society. It time to understand that technology has always been a tool or, as Castells stated, "Of course technology does not determine society. Neither does society script the course of technological change, since many factors, including individual inventiveness and entrepreneurialism, intervene in the process of scientific discovery, technological innovation, and social applications, so that the final outcome depends on a complex pattern of interaction" (Castells 1996, 5).

Maybe, as Bateson wrote, we should surrender to the belief that our knowing is only a small part of a wider integrated knowing that knits us all together (Bateson, 1979, 88). A network perspective helps us to understand that reality is far more complex than the categories we design. Not being able to communicate with those outside of our bonding networks, whatever they

may be, might have the most damaging effects. Each form of innovative scientific discovery, design, research, and play revolves around imagination and intuition, which enables us to create unexpected conceptual blends. In whatever we do, building bridges helps conceptual blending and forces the researcher to acknowledge his or her own situatedness in society as a whole. Like the role-players in *World of Warcraft*, scholars should dare to create and negotiate conflict, to take risks, to improvise. Keeping in mind that sometimes failure can lead to more success, as failure can widen our networks and broadens our mind.

Concluding Remarks

What does this mean for society? Snow considered how the curricula of schools and universities should be arranged to give people an adequate education in the different branches of knowledge. According Castells, one of the major challenges of the information age (the network society) is the installation of information processing and knowledge generation capacity in everyone of us.

I mean education. But in its broader, fundamental sense; that is, to acquire the intellectual capacity of learning to learn throughout one's whole life, retrieving the information that is digitally stored, recombining it, and using it to produce knowledge for whatever purpose we want. [...] before we start changing the technology, rebuilding the schools, and re-training the teachers, we need a new pedagogy, based on interactivity, personalization, and the development of autonomous capacity of learning and thinking. While, at the same time, strengthening the character and securing the personality. (Castells 2001, 278)

Castells' call for a pedagogy which is based on interactivity and the development of lifelong learning and thinking which not only generates knowledge but strengthens character, in many ways echoes the ideas of developmental psychologist and educational theorist Jean Piaget. Piaget observed that education for most people means teaching the children and students to resemble the typical adult of his or her society. He advocated something counter to this – to him, education meant making creators: "You have to make innovators, innovators – not conformists" (Conversations with Jean Piaget, Bringuier 1980, 132). Six years down the road from Castells' statement on education, we are mostly preoccupied with integrating new technologies into education, of which games and especially online games are but the latest incarnation. However, the innovative communities of practice that online gamers build are not only the result of the technological characteristics of MMORPGs, they are also the interplay between technology, different cultures, and play.

I would like to emphasize that we don't just learn *in* online games; we can also, perhaps even more importantly, learn *from* online games.

Cultural practices, social networks, and knowledge economies that develop in and around MMORPGs should inspire us to discuss pedagogies for the twenty-first century. These pedagogies should allow for the development of humans who master the art of conceptual blending and an awareness of context. Education should enable us "to see the world not as a collection of things, but a network of relationship, that network bound together by communication," to use Bateson's quote from my introduction again.

Culture is a perpetual motion machine that continually reinvents itself by making new blends or networks of what already exists. There are no new territories to discover, only new blends to be made. Culture arises from playfulness and imagination. Our fetishism should not be in the technology but in how to play, how to learn, how to live.