

Beyond The Magic Circle Marinka Copier

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Aan Ina en Harald
Aan Tijn

Who's unconditional love and support gives me wings

Beyond The Magic Circle **Marinka Copier**

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Beyond the Magic Circle

A Network Perspective on Role-Play in Online Games

Voorbij de magische cirkel

Een netwerk perspectief op role-play in online games (met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Utrecht op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof.dr. W.H. Gispen, ingevolge het besluit van het college voor promoties in het openbaar te verdedigen op dinsdag 12 juni 2007 des middags te 2.30 uur

door Marinka Copier

geboren op 1 november 1976 te Heemstede

That which we find through imagination is not imaginary in the sense that it is non-existent. Rather, imagination is a way of knowing that we can use to gain access to, and explore, numerous realities. The experience of these realities is not available to us through reason or logic and cannot be verified by the latter means, because such realities are of a different order or kind. What we learn through them is not inconsistent with reason and logic, just different.

Margaret Somerville, The Ethical Imagination

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Summary

Currently, game research is characterized by the (re)construction of contested boundaries such as the “magic circle” of the game experience. These boundaries create dichotomies, for instance, between the real and the imaginary that hide the complexity of actual play, design and research. In this thesis I propose to go “beyond the magic circle” in order to understand games and play from a network perspective. My case study is role-play in the online game *World of Warcraft* (WoW, Blizzard Entertainment 2004), whereby players act out the roles of their Fantasy characters. I understand Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) as networks of social interaction in which players (human actors) interact both with each other and with the system (nonhuman actors). Through interaction, role-players are creating meaning and social bonds that stretch out far beyond dichotomies such as in-character and out-of-character, in-game and out of game, real and imaginary, leisure and work or education, virtual and material, online and offline.

The emergence of Fantasy role-playing games, of which the pen and paper game *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D, 1974) is the first and *World of Warcraft* is one of the latest incarnations, ties in with the development of what sociologist Manuel Castells termed the “network society”. Through rich empirical case studies in his trilogy *The Information Age: economy, society and culture* (1996, 1997 and 1998), he mapped how since the late 1960s we have been witnessing a shift from hierarchies to networks in all sectors of society. Castells’ work is part of a growing body of network theory in which our society, *including* science itself, is understood as a complex system shaped by processes within and between actor networks that are often powered by information and communication technologies. In order to study MMORPGs as networks, I made use of Actor Network Theory as it is formulated within science and technology studies (Callon 1986, Law 1987, Latour 1987, 2005), Thomas Gieryn’s concept of boundary work (Gieryn 1983, 1999), Erving Goffman’s work on social interaction (Goffman 1956, 1974), and the concept of “situatedness,” a crucial addition that Donna Haraway made to network theory, which aims to make visible how scholars are positioned in constantly morphing network structures (Haraway 1991).

This thesis contributes to 1) an understanding of online role-playing games as networks that interact with daily life, Fantasy game culture, and the broader technological and socio-cultural developments over the last thirty years; 2) a description and analysis of 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, finally, 3) an understanding of how collaborative play, design, and game research are closely intertwined.

Going “beyond the magic circle” has profound implications for both epistemology and education in game research and design. A network epistemology asks for interdisciplinary academic work that combines not only scholarship from the humanities and social sciences, but also from computer sciences. Furthermore, it calls for a societal contextualization of scholarship and a connecting of fundamental and applied theorization both “inside” and “outside” academia, done by players, designers, and academics, roles that more often can be found in one person. A networked education teaches a specialization in the context of other research and design disciplines, as the ability and passion to create unexpected blends is crucial for future innovative developments in play, design, and research.

Preface and Ac- knowledg- ments

Something begins when I read the books of Terry Pratchett. He has the gift of weaving together networks of Fantasy¹ and reality, entertainment and cultural criticism, intellect, wit and sexiness, in a seemingly effortless mix that makes me laugh – and *think*. The best creations are blends of concepts that we do not expect to be compatible, but someone imagined them to be so anyway. The best forms of leisure, education, and work are those that provide an encounter with great people, as well as with yourself.

Everything starts somewhere, although many physicists disagree. But many people have always been dimly aware of the problem with the start of things. They wonder aloud how the snowplough driver gets to work, or how the makers of dictionaries look up the spelling of words. Yet there is the constant desire to find some point in the twisting, knotting, raveling nets of space-time on which a metaphorical finger can be put to indicate that here, here, is the point where it all began... (Pratchett 1996, 11)

Today, we no longer understand meeting yourself as meeting your “true identity” but finding out where you are situated, which roles you play, and which roles you can play, to imagine who we can become. In one of his most cited passages, “All the world’s a stage,” Shakespeare compared the world to a stage and life to a play. As sociologist Erving Goffman noted in furthering the metaphor, those roles are not masks, all those roles combined are us. We are not only the actors, we can also be the audience. In each situation, in each social interaction, we play a different role, as identity is a construct, an ongoing process that can both be playful and serious, but one that always involves power relations.

While we gained consensus over this concept of identity, the world became wired into a global information network. Simultaneously, Fantasy role-playing games emerged as a leisure activity in which players consciously play with roles.

One of the most popular online role playing games, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), is a mishmash between Fantasy and reality, a mix between romantic neo-medievalism and high-tech culture. While players dwell as elves, gnomes, and orcs in worlds of

¹ “Fantasy” as a genre is capitalized in order to distinguish between the Fantasy genre and fantasy in terms of the imaginary.

make-believe, they are both going with the flow of an imaginary character and world, as well as building an active out-of-character social network that stretches out over different social groups, nationalities, and time zones. Players are simultaneously escaping, questioning, and constructing their selves and the world.

This may sound paradoxical and confusing from a dualistic perspective. But if we listen to the growing field of network science and stop putting everything in opposing boxes and start to look for connections, what is it that we see then? Science is also about blending concepts that we may not expect to be compatible at first sight. Yet, with a combination of reason and imagination, we can learn to understand the patterns that connect it all. Fantasy role-play is my leisure, work, and education, it's where I encounter great people as well as the many roles that make me. Meanwhile, I gained a nickname or two and wrote a thesis.

Writing this thesis was like writing a travelogue. While playing and researching it was not yet a story. Only later, looking at the window of my word processor, I could look over all my experiences and shape them into a meaningful whole. This meaningful whole, which we call scholarship, stories, and anecdotes, has a temporary beginning and an ending. These stories could begin at any number of times and places in the "twisting, knotting, raveling nets of space-time". But if I had to make a list of places to put down some "metaphorical fingers" to indicate where this thesis started, then it would look something like this...

*Something began*² when I was walking down the streets of San Jose in California together with a group of Dutch game designers, educators, and researchers. It was March 2006 and the town was once again the stage for the yearly *Game Developers Conference*. To me, San Jose represents American suburbia. This is Silicon Valley, the place where Fantasy, magic, and technology were woven seamlessly together from the 1970s onwards. Colorful but worn-out wooden houses with romantic verandas stand next to huge offices, the mirrored windows of which reflect the midday sun and streetlights in the evening. Although the streets do have sidewalks, the wide grid of the town is clearly meant for driving

² The first parts of each paragraph have been rudely stolen and modified from Mr. Terry Pratchett (*Hogfather*, 1996), I hope he forgives me as everything has to start somewhere.

instead of walking. Out of the blue, one of the game designers asked me to which high school I had gone. On the streets of this American suburbia, we rediscovered our common ground: suddenly I recognized his name and face – he had been one of the three boys in high school who had introduced me to the first Fantasy role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*.

It had been a year earlier when my green-haired gnome character Yara burped rudely in the face of the older-looking gnome who had just handed her a muffin. It was February 2005, and a friend (playing a female night elf) and I were running through the snow-covered lands Dun Morogh, Azeroth, which can be found inside the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. It was the start of many hours of online role-play.

And earlier still, when I was studying history in Utrecht. The favorite hobby of one of my fellow students was playing and gamemastering Fantasy role-playing games. He took me to a game shop called *The Cave*, which could be found in one of the cellars by the wharves of the medieval inner city of Utrecht. During my studies, the cellar by the wharf became my second home. It was the place where I would read my history books and write my papers while in between chatting with the many gamers who came into the shop. At night I would meet with friends in cramped and candlelit student rooms to socialize and play pen and paper role-playing games.

And earlier still, when I visited the *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* that took place in the park in front of my father's office. I was ten and, together with my father, I made my way through the maze of old and colorful circus tents that housed the traveling theater festival. I was dazzled by the performances that were going on not only in the tents but also on the street: there were jugglers, opera singers, actors, and the smell of oriental food. I told myself that later – when I was grown up – this was where I wanted to be. *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams* would later become the traveling theater festival known as *De Parade*. Years later, along with friends, I would design and act in a theater production for this very same festival which was based on live-action role-play.

And much, much, earlier than that, when I was six and flying over the schoolyard of my public school. Each break, my best friend and I would go up to the take-off area – a small brick wall that fenced off the schoolyard. We climbed on top of it and took off. Together we pretended to fly over the village where we lived, looking down on the little houses, cars, and people.

In order of appearance the people in the anecdotes are: Richard van Tol, Zuraida Buter, Jørgen Støvne, Martijn Adelmund, the Wai Toe Ki-crew and Otto-Chris Holterman. I am very grateful for my encounters with them, as they inspired me to develop the ideas for this thesis. Over the last two years Zuraida and Jørgen travelled with me through the lands of Azeroth and academic research in various guises. Their brilliant role-play, jokes and clever insights made me laugh, cry and think. You're the best!

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Also, I would like to acknowledge my (inter)national colleagues and friends who make gaming related conferences, seminars and workshops into inspirational meetings of minds. A special thanks goes out to current and former colleagues of the *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA), both participants and crew who made the DiGRA Level Up conference 2003 into a success, everyone involved in the Strange Convergences conference 2006 at the *Meertens Institute*, the DiGRA role-play special interest group and the board of *International Journal for Role-Playing* (especially co-founders and colleague role-play researchers Anders Tychsen and Markus Montola), the seminars at the Center of Computer Games Research at the *IT University of Copenhagen* (Denmark) and the Game Research Lab at the *University of Tampere* (Finland), the *Utrecht Platform for Game Education and Research* (UPGEAR), the Playful seminars, the Dutch Game Days, everyone at the *Centre for Advanced Gaming and Simulation* especially Arno Kamphuis, Mark Overmars and Alma Schaafstal. A special mentioning needs to go to Tony Manninen from LudoCraft at the *University of Oulu* (Finland) who learned me to say: weeeeeeeeeheeeee! at the right time and place.

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Introduc- tion

I am a *raconteuse* and this is my tale. In spring and summer I like to do science on bare feet. This mostly happens behind my PC as I am switching between playing the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), answering e-mail, reading, and chatting with friends and colleague researchers.

In autumn and winter I put on socks and make myself comfortable with tea and cookies. The thesis is a reassembling of scholarship, anecdotes and associations from my life as a role-player in *Warcraft* and a researcher and teacher in new media.

“Will Wright is on the cover of Wired magazine!” One of my fellow *Warcraft* players e-mailed me. The famous game designer Wright had guest edited the April 2006 issue on gaming. Online I read one of the articles that carried the cheeky title, “You Play World of Warcraft? You’re Hired!” In it, John Seely Brown and Douglas Thomas stated that the day may not be far off when companies receive resumés that include a line reading “level 60 tauren shaman in World of Warcraft.” The two scholars from the University of Southern California made a case for this scenario by telling the story of Stephen Gillet, who became a successful new senior manager at Yahoo! not only due to his previous job experience, but also because he was a guildmaster in *Warcraft*.

Brown and Thomas described online role-playing games, in which players interact with the game world and each other by assuming the role of a fictional Fantasy character, as fertile grounds for accidental and experiential learning. In order to “level” their orcs and night elves, players are constantly challenged to develop new skills by completing quests, slaying dragons, and exploring the world. As the game’s design facilitates social interdependence, players often don’t do this alone, but instead organize themselves in guilds through which knowledge, resources, and manpower are shared. Being an effective guildmaster in *Warcraft* means being adept at skills such as “attracting, evaluating, and recruiting new members; creating apprenticeship programs; orchestrating group strategy; and adjudicating disputes,” in essence, conditions that provide a management training. “I used to worry about not having what I needed to get a job done,” Gillet said. “Now I think of it like a quest; by being willing to improvise, I can usually find the people and resources I need to accomplish the task.” Thus, Brown and Thomas concluded, he managed to translate his gaming experience into success in his working life.

More than 30 years ago, in January 1974, in a garage in the city of Lake Geneva near Minneapolis, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson hand assembled the booklets that made up (what is generally considered to be) the first Fantasy role-playing game called *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D). Back then it must have been unthinkable that this blend between wargaming, educational role-play, and Fantasy would have such an impact in the development of computer games. As Brad King and John Borland argued in their account of the rise of computer game culture:

It's almost impossible to overstate the role of Dungeons & Dragons in the rise of computer gaming, even if the game itself was originally all pen, paper, dice and notebooks. Scratch almost any game developer who worked from the late 1970s until today and you're likely to find a vein of role-playing experience. (King and Borland 2003, 4)

Since the release of D&D, the Fantasy gaming world has developed from what pioneer researcher Gary Alan Fine in 1983 called a "rather small, perhaps trivial, social world," (Fine 1983, 1) mostly consisting of white, middle-class boys and men, to a "rather big, important, social world" in which females now also make up a significant part (Borah and Schaechterle 2006, Yee 2005). Between 1999 and 2007, the number of people playing online role-playing games increased from 1 to 14 million. Approximately over 8 million people play *World of Warcraft* alone; this is equal to the population of Switzerland (Woodcock 2006)³.

The current Fantasy gaming world not only includes online games, but also tabletop role-playing games, live-action role-playing, wargaming, boardgames, and collectible cardgames.

The Dutch *Elf Fantasy Fair*, the largest Fantasy convention in Europe that attracts around 20,000 visitors each year, shows how Fantasy gaming often blends in with a love for Fantasy books, films, television series, clothing and jewellery, folk music, historical re-enactment, and (neo-)pagan spirituality.

³ <http://www.mmogchart.com/>



Figure 1: The Elf Fantasy Fair is the largest Fantasy event in the Europe. Women and girls are very active in live-action role-playing and online gaming. (Elf Fantasy Fair 2004, picture: J.J. van der Wees)

A three-year study that I initiated of the visitors to the Fair, in which I inquired into their interests ranging from gaming to clothing and from music to spirituality, showed the heterogeneity of the public. Not only in age, but also in gender and interests; participants create their own mix of Fantasy culture in which games often take up a central role (Copier and Ramstedt 2006).⁴

In the last three decades, the heterogeneous Fantasy gaming world grew exponentially; it has also changed dramatically. While it is still mostly boys and men playing wargames, cardgames, and tabletop role-playing games, women and girls are very active in live-action role-playing and online gaming.

Most parts of the gaming world have transformed from small, homegrown businesses to a million-dollar industry; live-action role-play, however, thrives on Internet shops of participants who make their own Fantasy clothing, latex weapons, and chain mail. Also, there are active scenes of independent designers of tabletop role-playing games such as The Forge, who sell their work in PDF format and through publishing on demand. And while wargaming is still considered to be "geek culture," *World of Warcraft* may indeed be something to put on a resumé for its educational value. One thing remained the same however, fantasy role-playing continued to be a predominantly white twenty-something culture.

⁴ Together with anthropologist Martin Ramstedt and research assistant Roxane Möllenkramer, I did a quantitative study of the *Elf Fantasy Fair* in 2003 (18,000 visitors), 2004 (20,000 visitors) and 2005 (21,400 visitors). In total we questioned 2,500 visitors with an average of 35% females and 65% males. An average of 40% of the visitors played digital role-playing games, 30% participated in tabletop role-play and 10% in live-action role-play. At a later date the complete results will be published.

Collaborative Play and Research in the Network Society

In this thesis I propose to understand Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* (WoW) from a network perspective. The emergence of Fantasy gaming culture, of which WoW is part, ties in with the development of what sociologist Manuel Castells termed the “network society.” In his trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (1996, 1997, and 1998, second edition: 2000), he used rich empirical case studies to map how, from the late 1960s onwards, we are witnessing a shift from hierarchies to networks in all sectors of society. According to Castells, this is due to three interdependent processes: the information technology revolution, the economic crisis of both capitalism and statism, and the blooming of cultural social movements, such as libertarianism, human rights, feminism, and environmentalism.

“Our societies are increasingly structured around the bipolar opposition of the Net and the Self,” Castells argued (Castells 1996, 3). The “Net” in this citation refers to new organizational forms which are powered by networked communication media. The “Self” relates to the multiple activities through which people try to reaffirm identity and meaning under the conditions of rapid change that characterize a networked society. Castells calls this global network, which is made up by technology, place and people, “the space of flows.” His focus is on the dynamic interaction between the real virtuality of the space of flows and the physical world. He illustrates the interplay between the Net and the Self through a series of very diverse case studies, including: business networks in Japan, Korea, and China; the Mexican Zapatista movement led by Subcomandante Marcos; American militia groups and the group of terrorists who released poison gas in Tokyo’s subway system; environmentalist, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements; the global criminal economy and Russia before and after the 1991 revolution and the demise of the Soviet Union. Castells’ work is part of a growing body of network theory in which our society, including science itself, is understood as a complex system shaped by flows within and between actor-networks that are often powered by information and communication technologies. As physicist Albert-László Barabási argued in his account of the emerging science of networks:

Network thinking is poised to invade all domains of human activity and most fields of human inquiry. It is more than another useful perspective or tool. Networks are by their very nature the fabric of most complex systems, and nodes and links deeply infuse all strategies aimed at approaching our interlocked universe. (Barabási 2003, 222)

MMORPGs are networks in which players (human actors) interact both with each other and with the system (nonhuman actors). A focus on this characteristic of online role-playing games allows us to grasp how online collaborative play is not an isolated phenomenon, but how it is interlinked with all

other aspects of daily life. From this point of view we can also understand how MMORPGs tie in with Fantasy game culture and broader technological and sociocultural developments over the last 30 years.

My network analysis of collaborative play, design, and research contributes to Castells' theory of the network society. Whereas he focused on an analysis of the sociopolitical forms of social interaction, I argue that online networks of play are also important new forms of sociability.

In order to study the interactions that are going on between the human and nonhuman actors in these networks, I made use of the Actor Network Theory (ANT), a theory and methodology that aims to understand the workings of network logic. ANT was first developed in science and technology studies (STS) in the mid-1980s (Callon 1986, Law 1987, Latour 1987, 2005). This method not only allows us to research collaborative play, it also uncovers how MMORPG researchers and their work are tied in with the networks of play and design that they study.

I understand the growing interaction between game-play, design, and research in the context of what Michael Gibbons et al. termed "mode-2 science." They argued that from the mid-twentieth century onwards a form of knowledge production (re)emerged that is context-driven and interdisciplinary, unlike what they call "mode-1" science, which is discipline-based and remains within the ivory tower of academia (Gibbons et al. 1994, Nowotny et al. 2001). Even though we should question the "newness" of network theories, it stands without question that network logic is the leading scientific and technological paradigm of our time. The unconventional anthropologist and play researcher, Gregory Bateson, proposed we try: "[...] to see the world not as a collection of things, but a network of relationship, that network bound together by communication. This way of seeing is not an abstraction, but a tangible experience that can be cultivated by practice" (quoted in Nachmanovitch 1981, 7).

MMORPG play and research

Online role-playing games are a favorite object of study across a wide variety of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and economics. Perspectives range from studying the motivations and behavior of players (Yee, ongoing), specific types of gamers such as power gamers and female players (Taylor 2006), the interrelations between gaming, cognition, and literacy

(Steinkuehler 2005), the poetics of online games (Klastrup 2003), and the relations between in-game economies of virtual items and our general economy (Castronova 2006).

These studies show that there is much diversity in playing online role-playing games. The three basic styles that can be found in online role-playing games are player versus environment (PvE), player versus player (PvP), and role-play (RP). While these play modes can be combined, motivation studies show that players often have a preference for one particular type of play (Yee 2005). Most scholars focus on the “instrumental” play that the PvE and PvP modes offer: this includes doing quests, fighting monsters, chatting, trading, gaining experience, learning skills, advancing levels or fighting other players. The role-play game-mode is remarkably absent from MMORPG research.

Role-play in MMORPGs

Even though the name “role-playing game” suggests that every player role-plays, most players use their character as a pawn instead of “playing the role” (Williams et al. 2006). Psychologist Nick Yee even feels that the “RP” in MMORPG is ironic, as “most MMORPGs have had to deliberately set aside designated role-playing servers, and these have always been in the minority” (Yee 2006). In WoW, these role-play servers (RP servers) are technically no different from PvE or PvP servers but, in order to encourage players to enact their characters, the developer, Blizzard Entertainment, added special guidelines, known as “role-play policies”:

Players who choose to play in an RP realm should abide by the Role-Playing realm policies and remain in-character at all times. Role-Playing realms give players the chance to develop characters with a backstory who do not go blindly from quest to quest, but instead assist or hamper the efforts of others for reasons of their own.⁵

RP servers are not a representative sample of MMORPG play and culture. The role-play cultures that develop on RP servers, complete with their own rules and etiquette, are what we now might call a “rather small, perhaps trivial, social world.” However, as sociologist T.L. Taylor suggests in her ethnography of the online game *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999), by telling “border stories,” in other words, looking at areas of gaming that are normally neglected, we can learn more about both the games themselves and about the broader culture in which they are embedded (Taylor 2006, 10). I consider the role-play game mode to be a highly “contested” and “negotiated” form of play, even on RP servers. Role-play is contested and negotiated because the shared fantasy that role-players construct by acting out their role is always under pressure by instrumental play and players who use their character as a pawn. Furthermore, role-play itself revolves around player-characters who negotiate which events can be part of the shared fantasy that they are constructing. It is precisely these characteristics that make role-play very useful in uncovering the functioning of the systems that MMORPGs are and the cultures in which they are embedded.

⁵ <http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/basics/realmtypes.html>

Based on this network understanding of MMORPGs, my hypothesis is that the concept of the “magic circle,” which is one of the most important metaphors in current game research, in many ways isolates both the game experience and game research. I propose that this concept should be removed from our repertoire.

I have three goals in examining this hypothesis: First, 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. Second, 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. Third, to show how collaborative play, design, and game research are closely intertwined and what the implications of this are for game research.

In what follows, I offer a further introduction to role-play in WoW, network methodology and the magic circle.

Role-Play in World of Warcraft

Players have very different motivations for joining a RP server. Some are primarily interested in role-playing, others like to be involved in PvE or PvP game-play as well. At the other end of the spectrum, are players who are either not aware of the type of server on which they are playing, or they have a reason other than role-playing to play on a RP server. Such players may state, for instance, that the player base on a RP server is more mature, or that they will reach instrumental goals more easily because there are fewer competitors.⁶ Role-play is not written into the code of the game; rather, it consists of a set of meta-game rules. Technically, role-play is "optional," the effect of this is that there is a constant negotiation process going on between players regarding the type of game-play and behavior that is acceptable. Besides this role-play in itself is also negotiated.

Role-play is a collaborative experience; by playing the role of their characters, players are creating a "shared fantasy" (Fine 1983) or "shared imagined space" (SiS, Edwards 2004). For example, a player who decides to role-play a gnomish innkeeper needs other players who are willing to enact their characters to be his personnel or guests in his tavern. Players who theorize tabletop role-play called this the "Lumpley Principle," after the nickname of independent game designer, Vincent Baker. Baker stated that the essence of role-play is negotiating which situations or events can be part of the shared fantasy. This negotiation process, and its constantly morphing outcome, is shaped by a wide range of explicit and implicit factors such as the 3-D graphical design, rules of the game, Warcraft lore, character backgrounds, character performance, player motivations, and the interpersonal relationships between both the characters and the players.

I propose that we can understand role-play 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 emerges out of a subconscious process in which concepts from diverse contexts are blended. Fauconnier and Turner illustrated this, primarily by using individual problem-solving tasks. In response to their work, scholars studying professional teamwork and children's pretend play have shown that cognitive blending can be a highly social and collaborative process in which roles, identities, and conventions are continually renegotiated (Sinha 2005). To return to the earlier example of the tavern, this means that our gnomish innkeeper has to deal with two types of negotiations: players who come in with no intention of pretending that their character is a guest in a tavern, and players who act as if they are in a tavern and, for example, may role-play their character as a friendly customer. Through negotiation, role-players create a shared fantasy in which they not only form their characters, but through which they also conceptually blend conventions, identities, and interpersonal relationships. Blizzard Entertainment only steps into these negotiation processes when players are unable to create their own balance of power:

⁶ On the RP server forums run by Blizzard Entertainment, the so-called "PvE vs RP vs PvP" debate, in which players discuss why and how they play on a RP server, is a recurring phenomenon. These are the motivations that were often repeated.

*If you find another player acting in a manner that contradicts the spirit of the guidelines detailed below [the role-play policies, MC], you **must** first verbally request the offending player to discontinue his/her behavior. If the actions continue after this request, only then should a gamemaster (GM) be contacted. (Blizzard Entertainment role-play policies, emphasis Blizzard)⁷*

As there are thousands of player-characters on one RP server, there is not just one shared fantasy; instead, there are multiple fantasies that are continually negotiated as well. I used ANT in order to study the functioning of these negotiation processes as well as the in-character and out-of-character roles, conventions, identities, and interpersonal relationships that self-proclaimed role-players negotiate in and through the systems of the commercially distributed game WoW.

Network methodology

When Callon, Law, and Latour originally formulated Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in 1980's, they argued that to understand the process of knowledge production in science and technology we should map the networked interactions between both human and nonhuman actors. In his latest work, Latour reformulated ANT as a new form of social science that consists of a "tracing of associations," thus offering insight into complexity, instead of mapping a material domain or providing a singular social explanation (Latour 2005). In order to understand how actor networks are formed, hold together, or fall apart, Latour proposed ethnographic research of actual processes. In turn, these experiences should be reassociated and reassembled into a "thick description" (Geertz 1973). In a thick description behavior is described in its context, in such a way that it becomes meaningful to the reader. Latour insists on calling ANT a travel guide instead of a methodology. This way, he argued, we cannot confuse ANT with a frame that is imposed on its object of research. Like a travel guide, ANT offers suggestions for tracing associations and for traveling through webs of interrelations.

A guide can be put to use as well as forgotten, placed in a backpack, stained with grease and coffee, scribbled all over, its pages torn apart to light a fire under a barbecue. In brief, it offers suggestions rather than imposing itself on the reader. (Latour 2005, 17)

"Tracing associations" allows us to understand the constant morphing process of the social in and around MMORPGs. Ethnography involves studying a natural research setting over a substantial period of time, thus collecting rich data in order to develop an empathic understanding of the behavior and meaning-making of persons in that setting. In traditional ethnography, there are three levels distinguished in which the researcher can integrate into the culture: observer, participant-observer, or

⁷ <http://www.wow-europe.com/en/policy/roleplaying.html>

participant. In an ethnographic study of play in MMORPGs, the researcher does not have this choice, he or she has to become a participant in order to play; thus there is no observer position possible. However, whereas Latour seems to suggest that the researcher stays out of the social process, I argue that in doing ethnographic research in MMORPGs we cannot bypass the fact that the researcher is an active actor in the networks of play, not only as a researcher but also as a player. Donna Haraway made a crucial addition to ANT by introducing the concept of "situated knowledge," which allows us to work consciously from a situated perspective (Haraway 1991). The participant position makes the MMORPG researcher into an active actor, both in play and in research networks. As a role-player and an academic, I am a negotiator in both networks; simultaneously I am also tying the different networks together.

On 11 February 2005, the day that WoW was released in Europe, I became a player, along with thousands of others. I had already been playing tabletop and live-action role-play games for a few years and was an active participant in the Dutch Fantasy game culture as a designer, researcher, and organizer. My ethnographic research into role-play was the reason I allowed myself to invest time in WoW; as a player, I would not have installed the game out of the fear that it would take too much time.

In chapter 2 I present an auto-ethnographic account of role-play in WoW in the form of a thick description. The style of writing was inspired by the work of Latour and Haraway. Whereas Haraway's work inspired me to express situatedness in writing, Latour's work showed me that in both research and writing we need to follow the actors themselves.

[...] it is no longer enough to limit actors to the role of informers offering cases of well-known types. You have to grant them back the ability to make up their own theories of what the social is made of. Your task is no longer to impose some order, to limit the range of acceptable entities, to teach actors what they are, or to add some reflexivity to their blind practice. Using a slogan from ANT, you have to 'follow the actors themselves', that is to try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have established to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish. (Latour 2005, 12)

When playing WoW, my academic framework is one of the cognitive structures I make use of, even when I am not doing research. Other players with an academic background also use academic categories, next to the game and character frameworks, of course, to make meaning. Thus, I do not let academic concepts come in order to explain the process of play from an outward perspective; I put the etic perspective on the same level as the emic one. With regard to my thick description, this means that, from a situated perspective, I mapped both the behavior and categories of my fellow players as well my own, thus illustrating how, through me, academic frames are part of the interplay between games, play, and culture.



Figure 2: Like a travel guide, Actor Network Theory offers suggestions for tracing associations and for traveling through webs of interrelations. Alabast and Yara travelling through Azeroth.

This thesis is a reassembling, a constructed tale of the negotiation and conceptual blending that I did. Sometimes I did this on bare feet, at other times there were tea and cookies at hand. The anecdotes and associations that I blended together are from my experiences including: being a role-player on one of the European WoW RP servers called *Argent Dawn* (from its date of origin onwards), being a researcher of online role-play, and being a teacher of new media studies who performs research on MMORPGs together with my students.

Beyond the Magic Circle

Within game research the concept of the magic circle is used to bracket off the game experience: "In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 96). Over the last years, some researchers, including myself, have expressed their concern about the magic circle concept (Castronova 2006, Copier 2005, Lammes 2006, Nieuwdorp 2005, Taylor 2006, Pargman and Jakobsson, 2006). The metaphor creates a false image of an isolated, magical, and thus difficult to understand game space. As Taylor argued, the notion that we can or should (re)constitute game boundaries "thereby solving the deeper social and regulatory issues that can nag us" is very problematic (Taylor 2006, 151). In the article "Connecting worlds," I proposed to withdraw from using the metaphor of the magic circle (Copier 2005). As an alternative, the network perspective forces us to deal with the fact that online collaborative play is continually negotiated over the imagined boundaries of dichotomies such as real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline.

This is not the only magic circle that I found in game research. In the context of organizing the first conference of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), I argued:

[...] creating a new autonomous discipline such as game studies mainly involves constructing boundaries on different levels. [...] doing game studies, creating a new discipline, means constructing boundaries on content, researcher and institutional level and therefore participating in a process of inclusion and exclusion, of constructing the other ("othering") in order to construct oneself. (Copier 2003)

I discussed the (re)constitution of boundaries between game research and other academic disciplines and between the “ivory tower” of game research, play, and design. Three years later, governments are now funding game research in which the humanities, information sciences, and design disciplines are brought together for the context-driven purpose of boosting both the local entertainment game industry and the development of game applications for education and training. Recent examples are the Dutch GATE (Game Research for Training and Entertainment) program and the Singapore-MIT International Game Lab. My network analysis of collaborative play and research contributes to a better understanding of the ways in which the different cultures are being negotiated. There are complex power structures at work in these networks in which not only research and design but also public funding and commercial interest are negotiated in the face of a society that talks back. Therefore it is crucial to make the shift from thinking in boundaries and hierarchies towards networks and negotiation. Recently, a growing number of scholars has been arguing that in all sectors of society “true innovation” is not technology-driven, but comes from a playful imaginative process (Florida 2003, Pink 2005). This, however, requires an environment in which people are encouraged to be curious and imaginative in order to make creative conceptual blends. In this regard I believe there is much to be learned from role-play in MMORPGs.

In order to enact their character, role-players invent new ways of using the game environment and system. Through in- and out-of-character negotiation, they create a shared imagination and tightly knit social networks that keep them in the game longer. Role-play in MMORPGs not only gives pointers for socially, instead of technologically, driven design, it may also help in creating imaginative environments for innovation. As the example of Stephen Gillet showed, MMORPGs can be fertile grounds for accidental and experiential learning. Whereas Gillet learned management skills through collaborative instrumental play, role-play encourages conceptual blending and collaborative imagination through negotiation – skills that are essential in innovative thinking and design.

Network logic implies that everything is connected. This allows us to understand the complexity of collaborative play, with the considerable risk of being bogged down by the webs of interrelations. This thesis is a transcript of my journeys and the people I encountered. It is by no means the only possible route, nor are these the only possible travel partners, but I hope that my travelogue will inspire others to journey through the complex webs of online play, design, and research as well. I am looking forward to a crossing of our paths.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1, entitled “Fantasy Role-Playing Games: Code and Culture,” provides an understanding of MMORPGs in the context of previous computer-mediated and analogue Fantasy role-playing games. I argue that the contested relationship between instrumental play and role-play in WoW can be traced back throughout the code and culture of these games. Furthermore, I show that the code and culture of Fantasy role-play came into being in the context of what sociologist Manuel Castells called the network society; a shift from hierarchies to networks in all sectors of society from the 1960s onwards.

Chapter 2, entitled “Role-play in *World of Warcraft*” consists of a thick description, a reassembling of role-play on the European WoW RP server *Argent Dawn*. The reassembling is written as an auto-ethnography, and in it, I describe various elements of online role-play in the context of my preparations for and partaking in a caravan organized by the role-play guild the Argent Archives. I further explore the contested relationship between instrumental play and role-play and between the different styles of role-play. The text is meant to reveal how the role-play experience is negotiated over the imaginary boundaries of real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline.

The aim of chapter 3, entitled “Beyond the Magic Circle,” is an understanding of the contested boundaries of the “magic circle” of the game experience and the “ivory tower” of academic game research. Based on an analysis of the ways in which role-play in Fantasy role-playing games has been theorized, I show the implications of bracketing off the game experience and academic game research. I claim that we need to go “beyond the magic circle” in order to understand MMORPGs from a network perspective.

Building on the thick description in chapter 2, the focus in chapter 4, entitled “Theorizing Role-Play in *World of Warcraft*,” is a further understanding of role-play on 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?

1 Fantasy Role-Play: Code and Culture

“Why do *World of Warcraft* players call monsters ‘mobs’?” inquired Richard Bartle during a lecture at the Waag Society in Amsterdam.⁸ “Because when I added monsters to MUD, I called them mobiles (for ‘mobile objects’).”

Bartle is the co-designer of the first *Multi User Dungeon* (MUD1), the textual predecessor of online role-playing games (MMORPGs). During his talk he traced the history of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) back to MUD1 (1978), arguing how the code, design, and culture of MMORPGs is always directly or indirectly inherited from its parent virtual world. Bartle concluded by explaining that “because there were no virtual worlds before MUD1” he and his co-designer Roy Trubshaw were inspired by the possibilities of networked computer technology and the pen-and-paper Fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D, 1974). At the time in the mid-1970s they were computer programming students at Essex University in England. In other words, WoW did not appear and develop in an historical vacuum, its “code and culture” is simply the latest incarnation of Fantasy role-play.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of MMORPGs in the context of previous computer-mediated and analogue Fantasy role-playing games. I believe that the contested relationship between instrumental play and role-play in WoW can be traced back throughout the code and culture of these games.

Furthermore, I show that the code and culture of Fantasy role-play came into being in the context of what sociologist Manuel Castells called the network society; a shift from hierarchies to networks in all sectors of society from the 1960s onwards.

Counter to what Bartle seemed to suggest in his lecture, we should not understand the code and culture of role-playing games in a linear way. WoW not only builds on its most successful predecessor, *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999), its players and designers are also directly or indirectly influenced by pen-and-paper role-playing games, computer-mediated role-playing games, and

⁸ On 21 September 2005, Richard Bartle was invited by the Cyberspace Salvations research program (University of Leiden/ Erasmus University Rotterdam) to talk about “the influence of utopian thinking on the development of computer technology and its applications in the 1980s.”

live (action) role-playing games. In addition, Fantasy role-playing games (RPGs) not only relate to the code and culture of each other, they are also a product of the society in which they are embedded. In order to understand Fantasy RPGs in a non-linear historical context, I have chosen to work with the network perspective. In the tradition of Actor Network Theory (ANT, Callon 1986, Law 1987, Latour 1987, 2005), this means I reassemble the networked interactions between the human and nonhuman actors that make up Fantasy RPGs.

Fantasy Role-Playing Games and the Network Society

Influenced by the growing popularity of the Fantasy genre, the concepts of "Fantasy role-playing game" and "Fantasy role-play" emerged from the mid- 1960s onwards out of conceptual blends between the transmedial Fantasy genre and cultural practices such as wargaming, historical re-enactment, educational classroom role-play and improvisational theater. Furthermore Fantasy role-play is influenced by practices such as Halloween costuming, military exercises, children's pretend play, scouting activities, murder mystery games and psychodrama. This blending was often a collaborative process among groups of Fantasy fans, wargamers, historical re-enactors, or computer programmers, who met in clubs, universities, or at the workplace. Sometimes directly or indirectly influenced by each other, these communities developed similar types of Fantasy role-playing games throughout the world, but predominantly in the United States and Northern Europe. After the first wave of role-playing games, games were developed not only in Fantasy settings but also in science fiction and other settings. This study concerns only those role-playing games that take place in magical environments filled with elves, orcs, and gnomes, as Fantasy was the founding genre and currently 93.5% of all MMORPGs still take place this setting (Woodcock 2006).⁹

Defining role-playing games

Many designers, players, and theorists have defined the different types of role-playing games as "interactive or participatory story creation systems consisting of (qualified) rules" in which players take on the "roles of fictional characters" in order to "act out or create a story" (Klastrup 2003, Mackay 2001, Schick 1991, Tychsen et al. 2006, Williams et al. 2006). Daniel Mackay, who studied pen-and-paper RPGs as a performance art, defined them for instance as:

[...] an episodic and participatory story creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters' spontaneous interactions are resolved. (Mackay 2001, 5)

⁹ <http://www.mmogchart.com/>

Fantasy role-playing games consist of a very heterogeneous group of game systems and styles of play that can range from a focus on instrumental play, role-play or a mixture. I distinguish between three types of Fantasy role-playing games, each of which requires different media to be played. These are pen-and-paper (or tabletop) role-playing games (PnP RPGs), computer-mediated online role-playing games (CM RPGs), and live (action) role-playing games (LARP or LRP).

In this thesis I argue that role-playing games are not necessarily about “interactive storytelling”; furthermore, it is not true that all players “act out the role of the fictional character”. When participating in instrumental play, players often use their character as a pawn whose characteristics, such as strength and intelligence (represented by numbers), can be improved by interacting with a fictional setting and each other. Although players often identify with their character’s role and experience game-play as creating their own story, this should not be considered to be “role-play” nor “interactive storytelling.”

I believe that in order to study role-playing games and role-play from a cross-medial perspective it is important to understand them in their own terms and not as literature, (improvisation) theater or film. Although the designers and players of role-playing games draw inspiration from other cultural practices and vice versa, we can only understand how this process of intertextuality works if we take role-playing games to be a cultural practice in itself. Building on the work of sociologist Gary Alan Fine (Fine 1983), the Threefold Model developed by a group of PnP role-players (Kim 1997) and the GNS theory of RPG designer Ron Edwards (Edwards 2004) I consider role-playing games to be “systems of social interaction” in which players (re)construct an interrelated fictional character and fictional game world. Role-playing games encourage different styles of play, of which the most important are instrumental play (fighting monsters or other player-characters, thus gaining experience points and advancing a character in level) and role-play (acting out the character).¹⁰ These styles can be combined, but as this chapter will show, their relationship is highly contested. While instrumental play is focussed on a game-mechanical development of a character in the context of the fictional world, role-play is aimed at dramatical development of the character and simultaneously the fictional world.

With regard to the role-play game-mode, role-play theorist Markus Montola formulated three “invisible” or implicit rules; the world rule, the power rule and the character rule, which form the foundation of the role-play interaction within role-playing games across media.

1) World rule: *Role-playing is an interactive process of defining the and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.*

2) Power rule: *The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.*

3) Character rule: *Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.*

(Montola 2007, 93)

¹⁰ The implication of this definition is that RPGs are always multi-player games and always offer the possibility to role-play. This means that “single-player RPGs” such as Planescape Torment (Black Isle Studios 1999) are not role-playing games, as players only interact with the game system (instrumental play); role-play is not possible as it requires the possibility of social interaction.

Montola observes however that there are examples of role-play in which these implicit rules are bend or broken (Montola 2007). With regard to WoW he argued for instance that role-players in WoW often compromise the world rule by bracketing of their instrumental play from role-play: the dramati- cal development of their character and the “shared fantasy” (Fine 1983) that they (re)construct, together with other player-characters, within the context of the pre-given fictional world of Azeroth. In other words: while participating in instrumental play, Montola assumes that most players do not role-play. On a RP server this can cause conflicts between player-characters due to a misunderstanding of which part of the game experience is bracketed or not (Montola 2007, 95). What Montola describes is precisely a moment where instrumental play and role-play are contested. In order to gain a better understanding of role-playing games I believe we should not only map role-play but also the relation- ship or tension between role-play and instrumental play. Although there are role-playing games which are aimed at role-play, most are build on instrumental play (especially online role-playing games) to which role-play is added as a “mindset” (Heliö 2004).

In order to map this tension I defined the power process which takes place in the social interaction process of role-playing games. This power process revolves around conflict and negotiation; precisely what is being negotiated (and how) depends on the goal of the game and the style of play. In this thesis I used the following working definition of role-playing games that describes the power process that shapes up playing a role-playing game.

In a role-playing gameplayer-characters engage in conflict and (re)construct and negotiate net- works of individual and shared cognitive frames by means of formal and informal rules.

In chapter 3 I further contextualize this network perspective on role-playing games. What follows next is an explanation of the different Fantasy role-playing games, ordered according to the media of which they make use.

Pen-and-paper role-playing games. Pen-and-paper role-playing games are played by a group of players (two or more) who come together for several hours, often in one of the players' houses. PnP RPG groups often meet once a week, sometimes over the course of many years. Players create a fictional character on a "character sheet" and a pencil is used to keep track of the character's development. One of the players is the gamemaster (GM), who has authority of the setting and the system of the game. The GM sets up adventures, describes the setting, and controls the action of non-player characters while players vocally describe (in first or in third person) the actions of their characters. Dice are often used to (partly) determine the negotiation process, and miniature figures and a chalkboard can be used to visualize the setting and actions. PnP RPGs are developed and published commercially and independently. A commercial game system published as book (system and setting) costs approximately €60, whereas independent games are sold online as PDFs for approximately €15.

Computer-mediated role-playing games. Computer-mediated role-playing games can be played both online and offline, on a console and personal computer. This thesis is limited to discussing online textual RPGs (such as MUD1) and online graphical RPGs (MMORPGs such as WoW) that are on a computer. Players create a fictional character in the form of a virtual "avatar." The setting and the system of the game are controlled by the computer. In CM RPGs, gamemasters take on the role of game moderators. The games allow for instant peer-to-peer communication through chat functions; additionally, some players use voice-over chat (using software such as *TeamSpeak*). Online RPGs are often persistent, which means that players can play 24 hours a day together with tens to thousands of other players who are distributed over a wide geographical area. Players generally play the same game for a period ranging from a few months to a few years, after which they often move on to a new game together with friends made in the game. Textual RPGs are often independently developed and free, whereas MMORPGs are commercially developed systems for which players pay a monthly fee of approximately €10.

Live (action) role-playing games. Live (action) role-playing games are played by tens to hundreds of players over the course of an evening, weekend or week. The game space is a physical environment; a room, building, part of a city, or countryside that is sometimes modified with props in order to create a certain setting. The player physically embodies the character and often wears a costume. Instead of verbally telling what actions the character takes (as in a PnP RPG), the player performs some or all of the physical actions of the characters they are playing. A group of gamemasters has authority over the system and setting of the game. They may make use of one of the few commercially published systems and settings for LARP, but most often they develop their own system and setting. Additionally, most players' groups create their own props, and players often design and make their own costumes and latex weapons, the latter if fighting is part of the game. Generally membership in a semi-professional LARP organization is free or inexpensive, and players pay between €5 to €350 for an event, depending on the location and the duration of the game.

Among the most well-known and influential blends of the above described RPGs are the PnP RPG *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), the textual online role-playing game MUD1 (1978), the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (2004) and LARP as it has been developed by organizations such as the *Society for Creative Anachronism* (1966), *Dagorhir Battle Games* (1977), *Treasure Trap* (1982), and the *Society for Interactive Literature* (1981). In the three different types of RPGs, the systems, goals, and styles of play take on specific forms, as the medium determines the possibilities.

The game-play debate

In WoW, Blizzard Entertainment differentiates between three playing styles: player versus environment (PvE), player versus player (PvP) and role-play (RP). Blizzard defines PvE play as “doing quests, fighting monsters, speaking, trading, gaining experience, learning skills, and advancing levels,” PvP play is aimed at “fighting other players,” and RP is defined as “imagine that you are an inhabitant of a fantasy-based world, develop characters with a backstory who do not go blindly from quest to quest, but instead assist or hamper the efforts of others for reasons of their own” (Blizzard Entertainment 2004).

Blizzard designed different servers on which certain play-styles are encouraged by the code and culture of the game. RP is encouraged on so-called RP-PvE and RP-PvP servers. For the ethnographical part of this research, described later on in chapter 2, I played WoW on the European RP PvE server *Argent Dawn*, where there are a few thousand players on the server who are encouraged to act out their character, while participating in PvE game-play. Whereas the PvE game-play is embedded in the technical code of the game system and generates experience points as well as material rewards such as armor, role-play is only encouraged by the meta-game rules of the role-play policies (table 1) and generates no game mechanical rewards. This means that Blizzard perceives RP not as a play-style in itself, but rather as a mindset that can be added to the instrumental play-styles of questing, fighting, and leveling.

Role Play-Specific Verbal / Physical Harassment	Players that specifically target Role Players for verbal/physical abuse (not limited to offensive language)
Out of Character (OOC) Discussion and Use of General Chat	The General Chat Channel should only be used for finding Story Lines (SLs), finding Party Groups and various other discussions pertaining to Base Story Line (BSL), game-related topics, and continuity. The General Chat Channel should NOT be used for any “off-topic,” non-Story Line or non-game-related discussion Absolutely no out of character (OOC) or non-fantasy related dialogue should take place in the /Say, /Yell, or Party Chat Channels Guild Chat will not be policed for any fantasy-related violations
Non-Medieval / Fantasy Character Names	Any Non-Medieval or Non-Fantasy names (i.e. Slipnslide, Robotman, Technotron)

Table 1: Role-playing realms policy (Blizzard Entertainment 2004).¹¹

¹¹ <http://www.wow-europe.com/en/policy/roleplaying.html>

On RP servers, RP is a highly contested style of play. Many players do not keep themselves to the role-play policies. The reasons for this are multiple. Players are either not aware of the type of server they are playing on, they used to role-play but stopped doing it, or they have a different reason than RP to play on a RP server. Some assert, for instance, that the player base is more mature or that they will reach instrumental goals more easily because there are fewer competitors, as role-players tend to spend a large amount of their time acting out their character, without participating in PvE or PvP styles of play. The latter points to the fact that role-play sometimes also functions as a stand-alone play style.

The role-play policies are rarely actively enforced by the Blizzard gamemasters. Instead, they function on peer-review basis, which means that players have to negotiate among themselves as to which style of play and behavior is accepted and preferred. If players are unable to create their own balance of power, they can ask gamemasters to step in by reporting any misbehaving players.

On my server, the peer-to-peer review process in which role-play has to be negotiated led to a recurring game-play discussion on the official forum of the server that became known as the “raiders¹² versus role-players and PvPers” debate. As a dramatic intervention in the discussion, the player-character Bippi one day posted an adaptation of Martin Luther King’s landmark speech, “I have dream”.

¹² Raiding is the high level aspect of player-versus-environment (PvE) game-play, in which 20 to 40 player-characters form a raid group in order to defeat unique challenges generated by the game, such as slaying a dragon.

I Have a Dream

by Martin Luther King Jr. adapted by Bippi

One year ago, a great CM [community manager, MC], in whose symbolic shadow we stand signed the Roleplaying Policy. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to thousands of roleplayers who had been seared in the flames of withering l337speak.¹³ It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But one year later, we must face the tragic fact that the roleplayer is still not free. One year later, the life of the roleplayer is still sadly crippled by the manacles of non-rping and the chains of discrimination. One year later, the roleplayer lives on a lonely island of roleplaying in the midst of a vast ocean of non-rping. One year later, the roleplayer is still languishing in the corners of *Argent Dawn* and finds himself an exile in his own server.¹⁴

¹³ The term "l337 speak" stands for "leet speak" or "elite speak". This form of chat text revolves around text modifications for instance by substituting letters by numbers and variations in grammar or spelling. Players use leet speak to show off their "inside knowledge" and technical competence. Role-players do not use leet speak while role-playing as they consider it to be breaking the coherence of the shared fantasy.

¹⁴ Bippi, Robert Cooke, official *Argent Dawn* server forum, 11 January 2006.



Figure 1: The gnome Bippi on the streets of Stormwind, one of Azeroth's capital cities.

By making use of King's powerful rhetoric Bippi demanded enforcement of the role-play policies: "a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of gaming, liberty, and the pursuit of roleplaying" and a peaceful coexistence of role-players and non-role-players on the same server. Bippi's speech shows how self-conscious role-players are in differentiating their play style from other play styles, and it illustrates how some role-players are able to position their issues within a cultural-historical context.

In his theory of the network society, Castells argued that, during the time that King spoke of his desire for a future where blacks and whites would coexist harmoniously as equals, a more discontinuous scope of social movements and subcultures started to develop. Social groups that no longer revolved around traditional meta-patterns (such as nation-states, languages, religions, classes, and so on), but instead focused on identity-driven issues of who we are and how we should lead our lives. Castells does not discuss whether the Civil Rights Movement is either typical of the network society or not, however, I believe it could be interpreted in both ways. These new forms of collective identity emerged together with networked, rather than hierarchical, power constructions (Castells 2000). Fantasy role-playing games developed during the same time period as the network society, and I propose that they can be understood as one of those networked places where new forms of collective identity emerge. The game-play debate underlines, however, how heterogeneous this identity-driven culture is. Not only the game (in this case, WoW), but also the style of play and the server are constitutive for the players' (collective) identity.

The negotiation process in which not only styles of play but also identity are negotiated is mediated through the commercial system that is WoW. Thus, the code and culture in which role-play is being encouraged or enforced is about how power is negotiated between a commercial company and its paying customers, and between the customers themselves. The code and culture of WoW enables and constrains the type of game-play, the interaction between players, and therefore how individual and collective identity is shaped. In what follows, I will map out the code and culture of influential blends of PnP RPGs, online textual RPGs, and LARP, in order to gain more insight in the contested relationship between instrumental play and role-play in WoW.

Dungeons and Dragons: Code and Culture

The concept of *Dungeons and Dragons* grew out of the wargaming community that existed in area of the twin cities of Minneapolis-Saint Paul in the first half the 1970s. The overall concept of the game was created by Dave Arneson, out of a blend between the Fantasy genre, wargaming, and educational role-play. However, the rules for the game were written down by Gary Gygax who had also designed the medieval/ Fantasy wargame rule set *Chainmail* (1971) that had inspired Arneson. The result was that the structure of D&D was very similar to a wargame, which was underlined by the subtitle: "Rules for fantastic medieval wargames campaign playable with paper and pencil and miniature figures". among wargamers, D&D was not an instant hit; it took a year for the first thousand copies to sell out through hobby stores aimed at miniature wargaming (Johnson 2004). Gygax sent copies out for review to the many homegrown wargaming magazines that existed at the time, one of which (*The Courier*) wrote:

[...] these booklets attempt to outline a system for "playing" the kind of Fantasy adventures one previously read about in paperbacks. The concept is remarkably interesting, since the same person interested in matching himself against Napoleon or Manstein might also find comparisons with Conan or John Carter enjoyable. [...] The "game" is played by various adventurers and a referee. The players, starting in near total ignorance, attempt to adventure in the wilderness around them, or in dungeons and underground chambers beneath them. The referee is informed of each action, and after consulting the maps he has made, the basic tables and information in the booklets, and his own imagination, gives the player a response. [...] Beyond the problems involved in play (find an intrepid referee), the other discouraging factor is price. These booklets are roughly comparable to "The Courier" in physical quality, but at \$3.50 each [\$10.00 for the whole set, MC] are priced rather high. Worse, all three are necessary. [...] In general, the concept and imagination involved are stunning. However, much more work, refinement, and especially regulation and simplification is necessary before the game is manageable. [...] I do not suggest these to the average wargamer."
(Arnold Hendrick, *The Courier*, 1974)

Even though *The Courier* did not suggest D&D to the average wargamer, the game gained popularity through word-of-mouth in the hobby store culture and the military, as many wargamers were (ex-)military. Next to wargamers there were Fantasy fans who developed an interest in D&D as they liked the idea of being able to play out the "the kind of Fantasy adventures one previously read about in paperbacks."

Fantasy fans playing Dungeons and Dragons

Following the popularity of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), the modern Fantasy genre came into being. The growing popularity of the "neomedieval" (Eco 1986) Fantasy genre from the 1960s onwards was due to its ability to express romantic ideologies that critiqued the discourses of capitalism, science, rationality, and materialism (Selling 2005). Rapidly, Fantasy became a trans-medial phenomenon that could be found in various media such as books, movies, television series, music, and games. The romantic Fantasy genre fused the blooming cultural social movements such as libertarianism, human rights, feminism, and environmentalism that played an important role in the shift from hierarchies to networks in all sectors of society (Castells 2000). In Tolkien's work, women were barely visible, however, the feminist movement picked up on the Fantasy genre, changing the discourse considerably by writing novels in which freedom of choice (human rights) and women play a significant role.

Fantasy fans who started to play D&D in the 1970s were mostly students who had neither experience nor interest in wargaming, as anti-militarism was very much part of the counter-cultural attitude. The growing popularity of D&D among Fantasy aficionados made Gygax realize that the game had potential to reach a mass market. He therefore republished the first edition in a simplified version (D&D basic set, 1977) that carried a new subtitle in which "wargame" was replaced by "role-playing game." "The original adult fantasy role-playing game for 3 or more players," it said. This version of D&D was released to toy stores throughout the United States and became known as the "tabletop Fantasy role-playing game." (see figure 2 for a description of D&D as it was given in the basic set). As the game continued to be expensive, many students photocopied the rulebooks on copy machines at colleges and universities, thus spreading the game rapidly (Succo 2004).

Dungeons and Dragons

Dungeons and Dragons is a fantastic, exciting and imaginative game of role playing for adults 12 years and up. Each player creates a character or characters who may be dwarves, elves, halflings, or human fighting men, magic-users, pious clerics, or wily thieves. The characters are then plunged into an adventure in a series of dungeons, tunnels, secret rooms, and caverns run by another player: the referee, often called the Dungeon Master. The dungeons are filled with fearsome monsters, fabulous treasure, and frightful perils. As the players engage in game after game, their characters grow in power and ability [...] The Dungeon Master designs the dungeons and makes careful maps on graph paper. The players do not know where anything is located in the dungeons until the game begins and they enter the first passage or room. They create their own map as they explore. While only paper and pencil need be used, it is possible for the characters of each player to be represented by miniature lead figure which can be purchased inexpensively from hobby stores or directly from TSR hobbies. The results of combat, magic spells, monster attacks, etc., are resolved by rolling special polyhedral 20-sided dice which come with this game.

Figure 2: Dungeons and Dragons basic set (Gygax and Arneson 1977).

Even though Gygax had simplified the rules, the game was still hard to understand for players who lacked a background in wargaming. However, the concept of playing a Fantasy hero was so powerful groups of friends used D&D to invent their own rules in order to make role-play happen (Schick 1991). This individual creativity resulted in many D&D campaigns being very different from what Gygax and Arneson may have intended.

At the extremes of the spectrum there were male wargamers who used their characters as pawns to enjoy the instrumental aspects of the game at one end, and at the other end both male and female Fantasy fans who tried to enact their characters as if the game was a form of improvisational theater. For wargamers, Fantasy was an interesting setting that made their battles and adventures more appealing, while to Fantasy fans the wargaming rules were merely helpful in acting out a fantastic adventure. The wide variety of ways in which D&D was played was not only due to the different cultures and motivations of players but was also part of what we would now call the “open source” characteristics of the code and culture of wargaming. In the wargaming scene it was common to negotiate and modify the rules; this is how D&D could come into being.

Negotiating wargames

Gygax and Arneson were both active members of the wargaming scene. They met through the *International Wargamer*, one of the many homegrown magazines in which wargamers discussed their hobby (Rausch 2004). Gygax was living in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, a lakeside town about an hour north of Chicago. There he worked as an insurance underwriter who spent most of his spare time playing and designing wargames together with his friends. In 1966 they had started the *International Federation of Wargaming* (IFW) that published the *International Wargamer*. Arneson was living in the twin cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul where he was a member of the Midwest Military Simulation Association. Both of them used their basements as weekly meeting places for wargamers (Pegasus 1981, King and Borland 2003).

There are two different types of contemporary wargames: miniature wargames and board wargames. Both grew out of the military need to study warfare and to reenact or simulate battles for learning purposes (such as *Kriegspiel*, 1811). The book *Little Wars* (1915) by the British writer H.G. Wells is considered to be the first published attempt to codify rules for fighting historical battles with toy soldiers (later plastic or metal miniatures) on tabletops. The book made miniature wargaming available as a civilian hobby to the late-Victorian and early-modern bourgeoisie. During World War II, many game designers found themselves in real combat and thus it was not until the 1950s that there was a resurgence of interest in strategy games as a hobby. Charles Roberts, a soldier who wanted to practice war on a board as well as on the training field, designed one of the first mass-market board wargames, *Tactics*, in 1952. Roberts went on to found the Avalon Hill game company, selling games through mail order from his garage in Avalon, Maryland. Avalon Hill had selected the battle of Gettysburg for their new game because of the upcoming Civil War centennial (1961-1965), which was widely publicized and thus Avalon Hill hoped to cause a greater public awareness for wargames (Roberts 1983). This

indeed happened, and in the 1960s the growing amount of books, newsletters, magazines, and media reports attested to the rising popularity of wargaming.¹⁴ The book cover of *How to Play Wargames in Miniature* (Morschauer 1962) illustrated how wargames were mainly sold as “toys for the boys”: “A game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys’ games.”

Throughout America and Europe, groups of mostly white, middle-class men started to emerge who – like the groups of Gygax and Arneson – would meet in basements and garages to simulate famous historical battles or entire wars. Their weekly activities were locally organized and played in regular groups of friends. But in the meantime, they also organized on a trans-local level in organizations such as the IFW, for which Gygax organized get-togethers; first in his home and later in a small convention hall in Lake Geneva.¹⁵ Almost every group or subgroup had their own homegrown newsletter or magazine; hand typed and photocopied, these were distributed trans-locally (nationally and sometimes even internationally). These platforms played an essential part in the mobility of ideas within the community. The publications often contained homegrown and modified wargame rules and settings, which were in turn tested and discussed during local play sessions and conventions. In other words, these were the places where the code and culture of wargaming was being negotiated. These newsletters and magazines show how the wargame community of the 1960s may have been the source from which D&D developed.

In tune with the growing popularity of the Fantasy genre, concepts were developing that deviated from the Napoleonic and American Civil War settings, instead recreating battles from the medieval era and fantasy realms. In 1968, Gygax started the Castle and Crusade Society as a special interest group for medieval wargaming within the IFW, and he wrote his own rules for medieval wargaming titled *Chain-mail* (1971). Later he added a Fantasy supplement that included rules for giants, trolls, dragons, and magic spells; Gygax also partly made the miniatures for this himself:

[...] as the members began to get tired of medieval games, and I wasn't, I decided to add fantasy elements to the mix, such as a dragon that had a fire-breath weapon, a "hero" that was worth four normal warriors, a wizard who could cast fireballs (the range and hit diameter of a large catapult) and lightning bolts (the range and hit area of a cannon), and so forth. I converted a plastic stegosaurus into a pretty fair dragon, as there were no models of them around in those days. A 70 mm Elastolin Viking figure, with doll's hair glued to its head, and a club made from a kitchen match and auto body putty, and painted in shades of blue for skin color made a fearsome giant figure. I haunted the dime stores looking for potential additions and eventually found figures to represent ogres, elementals, etc. (Lynch 2001)

¹⁵ One of these meetings was later called Gen Con 0 as it led to the start of the annual GenCon gaming convention (short for Geneva Conference). Nowadays, the GenCon is the world's largest and longest-running annual hobby-game gathering (25,000 visitors).

With *Chainmail*, Gygax introduced a medieval battle system but also started to experiment with skirmish gaming. This meant that, instead of having each figure representing ten soldiers, the game used a single-figure combat system in which figures represented single heroic characters. The introduction of the *Chainmail* rules displayed the ideology of the wargaming culture in which the rules were open for negotiation:

Although the rules have been thoroughly play-tested over a period of many months, it is likely that you will eventually find some part that seems ambiguous, unanswered, or unsatisfactory. When such a situation arises settle it among yourselves, record the decision in the rules book, and abide from then on. These rules may be treated as guidelines around which you form a game that suits you. It is always a good idea to amend the rules to allow for historical precedence or common sense – follow the spirit of the rules rather than the letter. (Gygax and Perren 1971)

One of the wargamers who started to experiment with the *Chainmail* rules was Arneson. His group also got involved in medieval wargames and started to experiment with new playing styles. According to Arneson:

In our own games we got tired of taking the town, or the hill. So we started thinking about other objectives in a scenario, and to do that we had to give our Generals personality. We found that by doing that players started to identify with them. (Bub 2002)

His fellow gamer David Wesley experimented with wargames in which players were not necessarily posted against each other. Instead, players controlled various factions in a fictional German town called Braunstein, set between two opposing armies (Mackay 2001). In order to control the intrigue between the different factions, Wesley came up with the idea of a moderator or referee who controlled the scenario information and could settle disputes over rule interpretation. Arneson liked this idea and started to referee his own campaigns which took place in the semi-medieval barony of Blackmoor. This is the campaign that eventually would grow to become D&D. Instead of using their characters as pawns, Arneson – inspired by educational role-play he'd done during his history lessons in college – invited his players to act as if they were natives to the world of Blackmoor. In the 1960s, role-play became a favourable teaching method in American schools and universities. In college history classes, Arneson role-played historical events and preferred deviating from the recorded history in manner similar to "what if" scenarios he created in wargames. In order to run the game, he used a modified version of *Chainmail* and its Fantasy supplement (Rausch 2004). After a year of experimenting with Blackmoor, Gygax invited Arneson to come to Lake Geneva to show him the game. Gygax:

Dave Arneson demonstrated his Chainmail game campaign spin-off, a man-to-man game where one took the role of a 'Hero' or 'Wizard' from the 'Fantasy Supplement' of Chainmail.

Each player had a principal figure, and troops were hired with gold discovered in exploration of a dungeon or outdoor adventure. These two concepts were to me obviously great ideas, and I determined then and there to design a special game system to manage something new. As Dave Arneson said in an interview in Different Worlds, he wrote none of the material, but he did contribute valuable ideas. (Lynch 2001)

Consulting with Arneson, Gygax reworked the Blackmoor rules into D&D and once this was finished, he started the company Tactical Studies Rules to publish the first edition of the game. The relationship between Gygax and Arneson soon ended after the publication of D&D, due to disagreement on the creative input in D&D. The “open source” culture of wargaming became problematic once it exceeded the low-profit hobby culture and authorship became not only a matter of credit but also of profit. Arneson took the issue to court, turning it into a legal dispute over the royalties of D&D. The outcome of the dispute was never made public; both claim the case was eventually settled amicably.

Negotiating Dungeons and Dragons

While the designers of D&D were in legal dispute over their creative input in the game, D&D – like the previous wargames – still encouraged players to modify the game to their own needs:

The rules contained herein allow only for the first three levels of player progression, and instructions for the game referee, the “Dungeon Master,” are kept to the minimum necessary to allow him to conduct basic games. This is absolutely necessary because the game is completely open-ended, is subject to modification, expansion, and interpretation according to the desires of the group participating, and is in general not bounded by the conventional limitations of other types of games. (D&D basic set, introduction)

Next to an upsurge in similar games, as soon as D&D became popular, players started to discuss “the best way to play D&D” which revolved around instrumental play versus role-play. In *White Dwarf*, a magazine published by the English wargame company Games Workshop, Lewis Pulsipher inquired, for instance: “Is D&D a talking-book or a serious wargame? Both schools of thought are analysed to discover which is best suited for ... D&D Campaigns.” In the article, which was aimed at players who wanted to start refereeing, Pulsipher divided D&D players into instrumental players and role-players – “those who want to play the game as a game and those who want to play it as a fantasy novel”:

[...] i.e. direct escapism through abandonment of oneself to the flow of play as opposed to the gamer’s indirect escapism – the clearcut competition and mental exercise any good game offers. There are two subdivisions in each division. The game-players may emphasise player skill in players-vs-monsters (and sometimes versus other players) or they may prefer players-vs-puzzles (riddles, traps, mazes etc.) to monster-slaying. Of course no D&D campaign is purely one or the other. The escapists can be divided into those who prefer to be told a story by the

referee, in effect with themselves as protagonist, and those who like a silly, totally unbelievable game. [...] There is nothing wrong with the silly/ escapist method, but it is a strange way to act, and my White Dwarf readers are presumably game-players as well as SF fans. Gary Gygax has made it clear that D&D is a wargame, though the majority of players do not use it as such. I personally consider the silly/ escapist style to be both boring and inferior for any campaign, though all right occasionally for a weird evening. (Lewis Pulsipher, White Dwarf 1, 1977, 16)

From the rules and an example of play in the D&D basic set (see figure 3), it indeed seems that the characters were not so much role-played but that they acted as tokens that were being moved through the adventure. "One player should map the dungeon from the Dungeon Master's descriptions as the game progresses. [...] One of the players should keep a 'Chronicle' of the monsters killed, treasure obtained etc." The only players who are narrating in the example below are the dungeon master (DM) and the "caller," the player who announced to the gamemaster what action the group is taking.

DM	"You're in a stone corridor, ten feet wide by fifteen feet high, running north-south."
Caller	"We're walking north."
DM	"Fifty feet up along the corridor there's a door in the east wall. It's five feet wide."
Caller	"Halfling will listen at the door."
DM	(He knows there is nothing they can hear, but he carefully rolls a concealed die.) "He doesn't hear anything."
Caller	"The fighting man will open the door. He's got his sword out, ready to strike. The halfling and the thief are right behind him."
DM	(They must enter and carefully examine the room.) You don't see anyone in the room in front of you."

Figure 3: Dungeons and Dragons basic set (Gygax and Arneson 1977).

In the D&D rules set, performative elements are only discussed in the context of the gamemaster, who was expected to "dramatize the adventure as much as possible" by giving detailed descriptions of the scenery and performing the non-player characters (NPCs) that players would meet with appropriate speech: "orcs are gruff and ungrammatical, knights talk in flowery phrases and always say 'thou' rather than 'you'."

The *White Dwarf* became an active site of discussion on both the rules and styles of play. Even in the most heated debates, most players underlined the importance of keeping D&D open for interpretation:

I have a complaint to make. I feel I must pass comment on the setting up of so-called authorities on D&D. [...] D&D is not bound by the dictates of any one group man or group of men. Although many rules need tidying up and explaining, this can be done by any GM of ordinary intelligence and there should be no need of a 'D&D Council' [...] to settle rules queries. (Ian Waugh, White Dwarf 7, 1978, 11)

In practice, the code and culture of pen-and-paper role-play was mainly consolidated on a local level, within the different groups of players. Through magazines, conventions, and later also on websites, players continued to discuss role-playing games and styles of play on a trans-local level. The effect was that from the very start, players were active in (re)designing and theorizing Fantasy role-play. Some players designed new rule systems for their own role-playing group, others published their games for a wider audience, often starting their own companies. These new role-playing games were located anywhere on the spectrum between instrumental play and role-play, often depending on the personal background of the designers and their previous play experiences.

Multi-User Dungeon: Code and Culture

As Bartle stated during his lecture in September 2005 at the Waag Society, MUD1 was developed out of a blend between D&D and networked computer technology. They arrived almost simultaneously in England. In 1973, the ARPANET reached some of England's universities and governmental institutions via a satellite link to Norway, from where a terrestrial circuit added an interface message processor in London to the growing computer network. Two years later Ian Livingstone and his flatmate Steve Jackson founded the miniature wargame company Games Workshop (1975) in London. Livingstone and Jackson were so enthusiastic about the review copy of D&D that Gygax sent to them that they started to import D&D into England (Livingstone 1977).

At that time, Bartle was still going to high school in a town called Hornsea on the coast of Yorkshire. At the age of fifteen he bought a copy of D&D and started gamemastering for a small group of Hornsea gamers. In 1978, Bartle moved to Essex to study maths and, later, programming at the University of Essex. There he encountered Trubshaw who was a member of the Essex Computing Society. Bartle joined the group that soon found itself captivated by the single-player adventure game *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), which had found its way to them via the ARPANET (King and Borland 2003, 52). The game was programmed by Will Crowther and Don Woods both of whom worked at the company Bolt, Beranek and Newman in Boston, which developed software for the ARPANET. In the *Colos-*

sal Cave Adventure, Crowther combined his interests in programming, D&D, and caving to develop a computer game for his daughters. Colleague and Tolkien-fan Woods developed the game further by adding elements from *Lord of the Rings*.

The Essex Computing Society started discussing ways in which they could use networked computer technology in order to create a multi-player version of D&D that would completely simulate the offline version. D&D was very suitable for this, because in essence it was a wargame in which every character and action was based on a range of statistics. Pulsipher, who preferred to play D&D in an instrumental way, even suggested that the ideal gamemaster “must think of himself as a friendly computer with discretion”:

Referee interference in the game must be reduced as much as possible, because the referee is neither infallible nor completely impartial. Effectively, this means that the referee should not make up anything important after an adventure has begun. He should operate monsters encountered according to logic and, where necessary, dice rolls.

(Pulsipher, White Dwarf 3, 1977, 16)

The infrastructure that Trubshaw programmed for what would become MUD1 consisted of a database of “rooms.” The database would remember what was in each room and it would allow different players to be in a room at the same time, interacting both with the room and each other. Inspired by D&D, Bartle in turn added tasks, puzzles, and ways to improve a character’s skills and power to the game’s structure (King and Borland, 51-57). MUD1 was a text-based world in which many players could play and chat at the same time; exploring dungeons, finding treasure, battling monsters (“mobiles”) and each other by typing text commands (see figure 4 for a description of MUD1).

Multi User Dungeon

One of the nicest things about BL [British Legends/ MUD1, MC] is that it actually has an object...a goal...something which all players strive to reach: immortality. In a nutshell, you start out as a lowly mortal novice. You’ve got zero points, but that’s just a temporary condition. Your job is now to score points and move up the levels. With each level comes new power and respect...and dangers. Score a whopping 102,400 points without dying and you win! How? Well that’s a secret...but let’s just say you will be transformed into an incredibly powerful being (within the game of course... no, I’m afraid you’ll still be your boring self outside <smile>). You will be granted tremendous powers and will become a game-operator of sorts... and then the second phase of the game will just be beginning. But you’ll have to score 102,400 points to find out about that!’

Figure 4: Spirogyra the wizard “Tips for players just starting out in MUD1/ British Legends”¹⁶

Soon after the Essex Computing Society started running MUD1 on the university's computer network in 1978, an online community of enthusiastic players formed. To them the most important aspects of the game were combat: "One of our most famous sayings here is: you haven't lived until you've died in MUD." And talk: "You may shout a message to everyone in the game. Quite a lot of shouting occurs in MUD from time to time, so don't be shy about it!" (Toth 2000). In MUD1, the computer had taken over the gamemasters role of mapping the world and performing the non-player characters (NPCs). Players had the freedom to play each for themselves, without being dependent on either a caller or even the gathering of a role-play group. The game was overseen by players who had finished the game and made it to the level of a wizard or witch; these users then functioned as game operators, helping other players whenever they were stuck in the game.

Both the above game description and preferences of players for fighting and chatting show how the code and culture of MUD1 was aimed at instrumental play. In order to play MUD1 successfully, it was not necessary to act out the role of a Fantasy character. Therefore, most players used their character as a pawn. A common practice in MUD1 that has been categorized as role-play is "gender swapping," whereby the mostly male players created a female character (Bruckman 1993, Turkle 1995). Next to playing a female character, the anonymity of the online interaction also allowed male players to act as if they were female players. This should not be confused with role-playing a character, as in this case, the female character could still be used as a pawn, however, the player is role-playing an alternative player's identity. Both the Essex Computing Society and Bolt, Beranek and Newman are examples of places where the network society emerged. Infused with countercultural ideas, at a time when according to Castells capitalism and statism were at crisis, mostly male programmers who "hacked around with software" saw liberating possibilities in computer technology. Journalist Steven Levy called this attitude the "hacker ethic," which included principles such as "all information should be free," "mistrust authority, promote decentralization," and "computers can change your life for the better" (Levy 1984).

What I want to emphasize here is the fact that many of these programmers were Fantasy fans and D&D players, whose interest influenced the software they developed. In order to experiment with software, test its possibilities, and meanwhile spread their countercultural ideas, programmers developed Fantasy games such

as Colossal Cave Adventure and MUD1. The games' source code was freely distributed over the ARPANET, which enabled players in Europe and the United States to negotiate, modify, and design their own MUDs, much in the same way as players had started to negotiate D&D.

This was mostly done by students who had access to the ARPAnet and developed new MUD codes, often naming them after their universities, examples are AberMUD (University of Wales at Aberystwyth 1987) and DikuMUD (Datalogisk Institut Københavns Universitet in Copenhagen 1991).

Negotiating MUD1

Throughout the 1980s, thousands of different multi-user online text environments were developed with names such as MUD, MOO, MUCK, and MUSH. They are often collectively referred to as MU*s. Both the code and the use of the environments are heavily tweaked versions of both MUD1 and its successors, generating – just like tabletop Fantasy role-playing games – many different codes and cultures. Some took over the Fantasy theme and combat-oriented gameplay of MUD1, while others such as James Agnes, a Carnegie Mellon student who build TinyMUD (1989), created environments that were not so much aimed at combat but at social interaction. Agnes largely stripped away the game mechanics of MUD1 and enabled players to create new rooms and objects in the database. His code formed not only the basis for many social, professional, and educational environments, but also for games aimed at Fantasy role-play. Whereas MUD1 was built and mostly played by men, these social modifications also started to attract more women. MUDs that were (primarily) created for instrumental play, such as DikuMUD, were also modified into so-called role-play intensive MUDs (RPIMUDs). With the introduction of 3-D graphical MMORPGs, these textual environments did not cease to exist. The RPIMUD network, which was founded in 2005, includes more than a dozen MUDs that are still actively played:

RPIMUDs center themselves around suspension of disbelief and playing out specific character roles as if the role were real and you were your character. In general, the objective of the game is not to complete computer-generated quests or tally the most kills in order to gain levels and equipment, but to collaborate with fellow players to create complex and multi-layered storylines in a cohesive gaming environment. RPIMUDs are very different from other MUDs because of the emphasis on character interaction over hack-and-slash gaming. (RPIMUD network)¹⁷

¹⁷ <http://www.rpimud.com/>

MU* culture continued to be very open source as there are only a few small companies, such as Skotos, who run the environments on a commercial basis. Ownership became a much more debated issue with the introduction of the first online role-playing games in the mid-1990s.

Live (Action) Role-Play: Code and Culture

What became known as a “live (action) role-playing game” was developed in the early 1980s by PnP role-players. According to Sean Fannon, author of *The Fantasy Roleplayer Gamer’s Bible* (1999), it was not surprising that one of the first things to happen after D&D hit was that some gamers decided it would be more fun to “really do it”: “There were already organizations dressing up in costume and physically re-enacting swordfights and ancient battles. In fact, many of the early gamers were intimately involved in these outside activities. The marriage of the RPG to live enactment was inevitable” (Fannon 1999, 163). These organizations for “creative history” emerged from the 1960s onwards out of blends between the Fantasy genre and historical re-enactment. The most well-known and still existing organization is the *Society for Creative Anachronism* (SCA). The SCA was founded in 1966 in Berkeley, in the San Francisco Bay area in Northern California (which is also in the vicinity of Silicon Valley). The universities and early computer companies in this area were a hotbed for people with countercultural ideals and an interest in Fantasy, medieval history, and/or programming.

Counter to the traditions of PnP RPGs and on-line textual RPGs, there is not one incarnation of LARP that became as well known as D&D or MUD1. The concept of LARP was (re)invented independently by different groups of people and out of slightly varying blends.

As “larpwright” Eirik Flatland noted on the history of LARP in Northern Europe: “In Sweden, the pioneers were groups who played roleplaying games and amateur theatre both. In Oslo, Norway, they were gamers, scouts and amateur film-makers”.¹⁸ I consider all these blends, including the activities of

¹⁸ http://fate.laiv.org/in_larp.htm

the SCA, to be “live action role-play.” However, not all live role-play takes place in a gamelike context, and thus some organizations do not carry the name RPG, but “creative history” or “interactive literature” instead. These different names often point to the source cultures of the organization and related goals, system, and style of play.

Counter to PnP RPGs and computer-mediated RPGs, role-play is a natural part of all forms of LARP, as the player physically embodies the character. This means that, in LARP, role-play as a style of play is not particularly contested, however, the different styles of role-play are contested both in relation to instrumental play, as well as in relation to each other.

Negotiating LARP

In what follows, I describe the code and culture of four different styles of LARP: creative history, Fantasy battle games, LARP, and theater LARP. These styles of LARP – as well as their names – are continually negotiated and therefore many other categorizations are possible as well. I chose this categorization as it shows the main differences in source code and culture.

Only a few organizations from the United States, England, and Northern Europe are being described, but similar types of LARP developed simultaneously in Australia, New Zealand, Russia, Germany, and South Africa as well. Although the histories of the described organizations are very diverse, most of them were developed by both male and female university students and also spread via universities.

Creative history. The beginnings of the SCA date back to 1960 when Dave Thewlis and Ken de Maiffe became friends while attending Indiana University. When the army posted them both to Germany, they developed an interest in the Middle Ages and Fantasy. After returning from Europe, Thewlis and Maiffe moved to Berkeley, California, where they started to experiment with swordplay using recreations of medieval weapons. Meanwhile they became members of the local Fantasy group called the Elves, Gnomes, and Little Men’s Science Fiction, Chowder, and Marching Society. One of its members was Diane Paxson, a postgraduate student in medieval history, who came up with the idea to organize a “last tournament” after having seen Thewlis and de Maiffe show off their medieval weaponry. What she had in mind was a “last tournament” like the Earl of Eglanton had organized in Scotland in 1938 as a form of protest against the industrial revolution. Paxson organized the last tournament in her backyard which had a similar shape as the courtyards she had seen during her trips in France. The event was set for May Day, 1966, and attendees were local Fantasy fans and university students (O’Donnell 2004). One of the attendants (William Keyes) described the event as follows:

At twelve noon, Diana and three others were standing around in costume, one of Diana’s roommates was still sewing on hers, and Diana was wondering what to do with four people in costume, other than admiring the outfits. Then it was 2:30 pm and there were people in medieval costume all over her yard. [...] Dr. Elizabeth Pope, head of the Mills College English Department, was the Official Judge. The Second Judge and official archbishop was Jon Stude-

baker, under the name of Sir Jon de Cles. These two judges would determine the winners of each fight on a modified fencing basis, where one counted a "killing" blow instead of a touch. They sat on red-covered thrones in front of a purple hanging. (Keyes 1980)

The tournament was a mix between those acting out roles, such as judge and archbishop, and those of swordsmen who participated in the instrumental play of a sword-fighting game. The tournament was so successful that it sparked plans for another event soon afterwards and they decided to found an organization, which they named the *Society for Creative Anachronism*, "because the group was trying to recreate the ways of the Middle Ages as it could have been, which would certainly be considered an anachronism in twentieth-century Berkeley, and the goal was creativity" (Keyes 1980). The purpose of the SCA was to re-create the best parts of past material culture, technology, and behavior. In order to immerse themselves in an imaginary past, SCA members take on semi-historical Fantasy roles during tournaments, wars, feasts, and revels.

Interest in the SCA quickly spread, through the "authentic" re-enactment organizations which had an overlap with wargaming, as well as through Fantasy fandom and, later, via PnP role-players. These groups all had an established network of clubs, conventions, and publications. Next to holding demonstrations during Fantasy and PnP role-play conventions, the society also started to publish their own magazine named *Tournaments Illuminated*. Herein they provided information on upcoming events, general interest articles on medieval culture and literature, how-to articles for making appropriate clothing and constructing weaponry, and some poetry and verse. However, the major growth in the SCA and other "creative history" organizations came after the release of D&D, through which the concept of "Fantasy role-play" could become more mainstream.

Fantasy battle game. In 1977, after seeing the movie *Robin and Marion* (1976) and reading Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Bryan Weise, a university student from Maryland, came up with the idea to organize Fantasy battles with padded weapons. He ran an ad for his idea on an underground radio station and gathered a group of students with an interest in Fantasy and medieval history, who participated in battles with weapons made of couch-padding foam that was duct-taped to sticks. After a few battles, Weise founded the organization *Dagorhir Battle Games* (*Dagorhir* means "battle lords" in J.R.R. Tolkien's Sindarin language) that still exists today. According to *Dagorhir's* "origin story," Weise was only inspired by the Fantasy genre: "Bryan had never heard of "medieval re-enactment," "Live Action Role Playing," or "Dungeons and Dragons." But he wanted to find a way to capture that spirit of adventure that could only come from wielding a sword or bow."¹⁹ The primary focus of *Dagorhir* is combat simulation; players call it both a sport and a game, with a secondary element of role-playing an alternative persona. Weise became, for example, Aratar Anfinhir the Stormbringer. Furthermore, *Dagorhir* combines elements of both history and Fantasy: during a battle, players dressed up as Roman Legionnaires can be found fighting next to orcs, goblins, vikings, samurai, and elves. The popularity of

¹⁹ <http://www.dagorhir.com/dagorhir/history.htm>

Dagorhir spread, under influence of the popularity of D&D, via the university and the Maryland Renaissance Festival, which is a mixture of historically accurate and Fantasy reenactment.

Live action role-play. In 1982, a group of D&D players from England founded *Treasure Trap* and started to run live action D&D games in Peckforton Castle in Cheshire. Their games closely reproduced D&D, using the same form of character creation and development, including classes, levels, and experience points. Each weekend the group would organize events in which costumed players carrying foam and plastic weapons were run through a series of staged encounters with other players who acted as the "monster crew" (Hook 2006). Inside the castle, players were expected to stay "in character," in other words, to act as the character they had designed beforehand. By participating, players generated experience points which they could use to "level up" (increase) the skills of their character. This type of LARP is also called "line games" or "adventure LARPs" as all encounters are scripted by the organizers and develop in a mostly linear fashion (Costikyan 1994). *Treasure Trap* ran until 1984 when the castle was sold, however, the game had an enormous influence on the development of LARP in England; many *Treasure Trap* players started their own groups, making use of similar game systems. Direct spin-offs from *Treasure Trap* still exist today and are part of the student societies of Durham and Cambridge university.

Theater LARP. Theater-style role-play has been developed both in the United States (called "interactive literature") and in Northern Europe (called "Nordic LARP" and "Arthaus LARP"). Although there are profound differences between both traditions, they share a style of play that tends to avoid physical combat, (or makes use of symbolic combat, for instance through "rock, paper, scissors"), and a focus on character development. Notably, one of the few commercially published LARP systems, called *Mind's Eye Theatre* (White Wolf 1999), can also be characterized as theater-style LARP.

In 1981 the Society for Interactive Literature was founded by Walter Freitag, Mike Massamilla, and Rick Dutton at Harvard University. The group staged its first LARP event, entitled *Rekon*, in 1983 at the Boskone Science Fiction convention. The game was such a success that many *Rekons* followed. Game designer Greg Costikyan describes a *Rekon* as an "interactive LARP," as players work out the permutations of the plot in interaction with each other:

In a rekon, the LARP producers devise a whole fantasy world, complete with characters and their backgrounds, plots and subplots, and rules. Players write in before hand, and receive massive packets of background information and their character write-up; they then show up for a weekend of gaming, interacting with the other characters and working out the permutations of the plot. The whole comes to some sort of satisfactory resolution by the end of the weekend. (Costikyan 1994)

Even though LARP has been developed independently since the early 1980s in Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, they all focus on theater-style LARP, often in a more radical way than in the

United States. Scenery is very important and players stay “in character” throughout the whole event, including cooking, eating, and sleeping. Focus often lies on an in-depth (psychological) experience of the character. The concept of “Nordic LARP” emerged in 1997 with the organization of the yearly Knutepunkt conference, where LARPer from all Nordic countries gather for a few days to role-play, discuss role-play and socialize. In the context of Knutepunkt, players write role-play manifestos in which they advocate specific styles of role-play, and they theorize their experience in order to create better LARPs. A more radical part of the Nordic LARP scene is called “Arthaus LARP” or “avant-garde LARP”; they often step away from Fantasy genre and focus on themes such as politics, religion, or sexuality.

Conclusions

The name “Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game” seems to suggest that its players role-play. Paradoxically, the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* is coded for instrumental play. As the word “warcraft” in the title emphasizes, playing the game is about battling monsters and other players. In order to participate in instrumental play, it is not necessary to perform the character. The result of this is that most players use their character as a pawn. Exceptions can be found on RP servers, where *Blizzard Entertainment* encourages players to act out their characters’ roles. However, this practice is not embedded in the code of the game, but only encouraged through the meta game rules of the role-play policies. These policies are rarely actively enforced by the developer; instead they function on the basis of peer-to-peer review. On the RP server *Argent Dawn*, this resulted in a recurring discussion that players called the “raiders versus role-players and PvPers” debate. Blizzard only steps into the game-play negotiation process when players are unable to create their own balance of power. In other words, even on a WoW RP server, role-play is a contested form of play. In this chapter, I outlined how the contested relationship between instrumental game-play and role-play in WoW can be traced back throughout the code and culture to previous digital and analogue Fantasy role-playing games.

The original concept for D&D was conjured up by Dave Arneson out of a blend between medieval/ Fantasy wargaming and educational role-play. However, Gary Gygax, who wrote the rule set for D&D, based the system of game on wargaming and left out Arneson’s idea of acting out the role of the character. When it turned out that not only wargamers, but also Fantasy fans, had an interest in D&D, Gygax changed the subtitle of D&D from “rules for fantastic medieval wargames” to “adult fantasy role-playing game.” As many players were attracted by the idea of being able to play the hero in their own adventure, the concept of tabletop Fantasy role-play quickly gained popularity. While the rules of D&D were still aimed at instrumental play, players shaped their own practice of Fantasy role-play locally, over the whole spectrum of instrumental play and role-play.

Roy Thrubshaw and Richard Bartle combined network technology and the rule set of D&D to design MUD1. As a result, the MUD1 was coded for instrumental play. In order to play MUD1 suc-

cessfully, it was not necessary to act out the role of the Fantasy character. Therefore, most players used their character as a pawn. However, "gender swapping" was a common practice, whereby the mostly male players created a female character. The anonymity of the online interaction also allowed male players act as if they were female themselves. I claimed that this means they were not role-playing a character – as the female character was still a pawn – but role-playing a player. Because Thrubshaw and Bartle released the code of MUD1 as open source, players started to modify and design new textual environments over the whole spectrum of instrumental play and role-play.

As with tabletop role-playing games and online textual role-playing games, the concept of "live (action) role-playing game" was "invented" almost simultaneously by different groups of people. However, contrary to these other traditions, there is not one incarnation of LARP that became as well known as D&D or MUD1. As a result, players with an interest in role-play did not have to deviate from a game with an instrumental rule set. Instead, different game systems and styles of play developed from the beginning. Unlike PnP RPGs and computer-mediated RPGs, role-play is a natural part of all forms of LARP, as the player physically embodies the character. This means that in LARP, role-play as a style of play is not so much contested, however, the different styles of role-play thus have been negotiated from the beginning. This is not unique to LARP; in the traditions of PnP RPG and computer-mediated RPGs, the different styles of role-play became contested as well.

These three mappings of D&D, MUD1, and LARP show that the contested relationship between instrumental play and role-play in WoW can indeed be traced back throughout the codes and cultures of previous Fantasy role-playing games. In all three practices, the contested relationship between the different play-styles resulted in players creating their own game environments for their preferred play style.

The resulting do-it-yourself culture of Fantasy role-playing games is a typical characteristic of the network society (Castells 2000). As I have shown, Fantasy can furthermore be understood as representing the countercultural ideologies that critiqued the discourses of capitalism, science, rationality, and materialism (Selling 2005).

In the next chapter I present a thick description (Geertz 1973) of my role-play experiences on the *Argent Dawn* RP server. There I will further explore the contested relationships between instrumental play and role-play and between the different styles of role-play – within the game as well as out of it, online and offline. Counter to the practices that were mapped in this chapter, players who want to role-play in WoW cannot create their own game; they are dependent on the code and culture of the commercial game system. As Bippi's speech quoted earlier in the chapter shows, the result is that role-play continues to be a contested play style: it is not embedded in the code, nor enforced by Blizzard, but has to be negotiated socially among players themselves.

I Have a Dream

by Martin Luther King Jr. adapted by Bippi

When we let roleplaying ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every town and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of Argent Dawn's children, Men and Night Elves, Orcs and Trolls, Gnomes and Tauren, Forsaken and Dwarves, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Argent Dawn motto, "Free at last! free at last! thank Blizzard, we are free at last!"²⁰

²⁰ Bippi, Robert Cooke, official Argent Dawn server forum, 11 January 2006.

2 Role-Play in World of Warcraft

“Darn,” I cursed at myself as I walked up to my desk to turn on my computer. It was mid September 2006, I looked at my watch, it was already 7:15 pm and I wanted to be logged onto *World of Warcraft* (WoW) around 7:30 pm. Considering that it was a Sunday evening, there would probably be a queue of a few hundred players who wanted to connect to the *Argent Dawn* RP server, just like me. This meant it would be impossible to get logged on before 8:00 pm. I tried to remember what Eiswein wrote in his post on the official server forum.

The caravan of the Argent Archives would leave for Thelsamar (Loch Modan) from outside the gates of the Alliance city of Ironforge at 8:30 pm. The dwarven Archivar Eiswein, head of the Argent Archives and organizer of the event, had asked player-characters (PCs) to arrive early so he could hand out assignments and missions. While Windows loaded, I made a quick to-do list: 1) As we would be travelling through the winter landscape of Dun Morogh I had to dress my gnome character Speckles Snapwiggle in proper clothes – gloves and furry-looking boots would be essential for a wintry feel, 2) I had to move Speckles from the Alliance capital city of Stormwind to Ironforge – the Deeprun Tram that runs between the two cities would probably be the fastest, 3) I wanted to answer some letters sent through the in-game postal system. Most of them were job offers for Speckles, who together with her twin sister Freckles forms a photographers duo called the Snap Sisters. This means they take on jobs that involve photographing characters and role-play events such as weddings, sporting events, trials, beauty pageants, markets, and, in this case, the Archives caravan.²¹

I (30, Dutch) picked up my mobile phone and rang my friend Zoe (29, Dutch), who plays the role of the character Freckles. “Are you already in?” I asked, “Is there a queue?” It turned out that she had been in-game the whole day and yes, she heard there was a quite a queue. As WoW loaded and I waited for the length of the queue to show up, Zoe and I chatted about her work (as a saleswoman in a game shop and as a teacher in a game design program), my work, and our joint experiences in WoW such as the photographer twins and the Archives.

The Argent Archives

Eiswein had started the Argent Archives role-play guild in August 2006, as a fictional subdivision of the Ironforge Library. This library is part of the pre-designed world universe of Warcraft. In-game, the library can be found in one of the dark halls of the circularly built city of Ironforge. The underground city is constructed in the heart of the Khaz Modan mountains and is home to many non-player characters (NPCs), which are game-generated characters such as explorers, miners, and peddlers, who hand out quests, teach skills, and peddle their wares. The Hall of Explorers contains both the Ironforge Library and a museum where various items such as artifacts and fossils are on display, such as a cata-

²¹ The photographs and reports of the Snap Sisters can be found at: <http://play.blogs.com>.

pult from the Second War, which was a war between the two political factions of the Horde and the Alliance. Behind the museum lies the library, which is populated by members of the NPC guild of the Explorers League. They send players on quests to the many archaeological dig-sites where the League is researching the origin of the dwarven race. By doing these quests, players not only gain experience points that level their character, they also learn about the history of Azeroth. The game holds no further information on the library itself, which enabled Eiswein to make up his own story, without breaking the rules of Warcraft's lore as it has been written throughout the different games that Blizzard Entertainment published in this setting. During the previous two weeks, Eiswein and other members of the Argent Archives were often found in the library, where they were performing their roles of scribe or messenger. The in-character (IC) goal of the Archives is to collect information on citizens throughout Azeroth. Announcing the upcoming caravan, Eiswein wrote on the forum:

The Argent Archives have spent 2 weeks in Ironforge to resupply and restock before they set out on their great journey. In short, the guild collects information on every character of the realm, organizing it into a great archive. (OOC this means our upcoming website <http://argentarchives.net>) Some of the information is rather sensitive and the archives must therefore be guarded. Not to mention that the guild also carries merchandise of great value. Wine, spices, exotic animals (rabbits), tobacco and fine silk are to be sold in order to fund the guild in the future. (Eiswein, Argent Dawn forum, 12 September 2006)

Either as guards or merchants, role-players and RP guilds were invited to join the bi-weekly caravan by which the archives are moved to a new town or village where the guild members would interview the inhabitants. Out of character (OOC), Eiswein explained on the forum that his aims with the guild were not only to give his guild members (and anyone who interacts with the Argent Archives) participation in an open-ended plot line, but also to strengthen the ties between the guilds on the *Argent Dawn* server, to search for undiscovered talented role-players, and to encourage politeness, role-playing, and comradeship in the community. Many players were enthusiastic about the project, especially when they found out that the player who role-played Eiswein was Jørgen (24, Norwegian), who became well-known by founding previous role-play guilds such as the Stormwind City Watch, a succesful player-run police force in the capital.

There were 260 players in front of me in the queue – I mumbled. Zoe laughed: “Be happy if you make it by eight.” “I’ll get something to eat first, then,” I replied.



Figure 1: The dwarven Archivar Eiswein (standing behind the table) and other members of the Argent Archives were often found in the Ironforge library, where they were performing their roles of scribe or messenger.

The journey begins

Upon returning with tea and a cheese sandwich, the queue was down to 145. The good thing was that the queue gave me some time to clean off all the stacks of research papers and teaching materials from my desk. While eating my sandwich, I turned on MSN and started chatting with Zoe while I simultaneously went through my e-mail. As Freckles was recovering from a previous role-play adventure (in which we were stranded on a deserted island), Zoe would use one of her other characters to travel with the caravan. It was 7:50 pm when I was finally able to log on.

As she should, Speckles appeared where I had logged out the last time – in a tavern in the Dwarven district of Stormwind. The top view angle of the camera made my gnomish character look unpleasantly small, as if I was a giant looking down on her. Using my mouse I quickly turned and lowered the camera and as I zoomed in, I smiled at the combination of her funny-looking three red ponytails and the determined expression on the character's face. Even though WoW offers only a limited number of possibilities in character-creation, this gnome means more to me than “just” a pixelated avatar.





Figure 2: Speckles appeared where I had logged out the last time – in a tavern in the Dwarven district of Stormwind.

To me, Speckles' almond-shaped blue eyes tell the story of the character I designed her to represent, a character who has accumulated a personal history due to the way I role-played her during many adventures. To me, she is Speckles Snapwiggles, a gnome photographer, a character I paradoxically experience as having both her own identity as well as being part of myself. Like an improvisation actor or a puppet master I am the one performing her role and making her into a character for both myself and other player-characters.

My attention was pulled to the chat window in the lower left-hand corner of the screen when a few players welcomed me by sending "whispers." There were many players online, so text was scrolling rapidly through the chat window. This window displays not only chat messages from players in the immediate surroundings (the "say" channel) but also private messages from players anywhere in the game world ("whispers"), guild messages, world channels, and non-chat messages such as "emotes" (used to express an emotion). After typing the comment `/chatlog` into the chat prompt (allowing me to log all of that evening's chat), I opened Speckles' bags so I could change her clothes.

How to dress, walk, and behave

We would be traveling through a cold area so I put together an outfit from clothes that looked warm and carried names such as `<ragged leather boots>`, `<rough leather pants>`, `<red linen shirt>`, `<rough leather vest>`, and `<frayed gloves>`. Clothing is an important element in the gameplay of WoW. In regard to instrumental play, clothing is armor which functions as protection. Through questing, player-characters progress in level and, as a material reward, they receive more protective and higher-level armor, which in turn again enables them to advance more easily in level.²² Clothing comes in matching sets of trousers, belts, gloves, and so on, and players are encouraged to gather all the different items to create a complete outfit. Next to protection, player-characters use clothing to show off instrumental playing skills, as high-level outfits look more extravagant and are rarer compared to lower-level clothing.

In the context of role-play, player-characters use clothing to create their own costumes (not necessarily making use of the pre-designed matching outfits) to reflect each character's identity and to create a coherent situation and interaction. For instance, dressing Speckles in a dress with slippers would in this event break the coherence of a setting in which a caravan traveled through a wintry landscape. However, a performance of the reason why she was only wearing a dress and slippers – maybe she was in such a hurry that she forgot and now her toes were freezing off? – could reinstate and even strengthen the coherence, as it would underline the coldness of the setting. From the perspective of role-play, the difficulty is that certain clothes can only be worn on a certain level. This means that

²² One of the main instrumental goals of the game is to "level" a character from level 1 (without any skills or fancy clothes or armor) to level 60 or 70 (in the latest expansion of the game). Leveling can be done through exploration of the game world, doing quests and slaying monsters. Thus the player gains experience points, skills and material rewards such as armor and weapons, that all help in further enhancing the character.

sometimes I might try to advance a character's level not out of an instrumental game-play interest, but instead because attaining a higher level would mean I could dress that character in a more appropriate outfit.

To make them easily, recognizable, Zoe and I gave our twin gnomes exactly the same appearance (except for an earring: Speckles has one in her left ear and Freckles' is in her right ear). Also, we often dress them in the same outfit; however, tonight Speckles would be alone, which meant I only had to take the setting into consideration while putting together an outfit. It was time to go! Answering in-game mail would have to wait until another time. I moved Speckles and she automatically started to run. Quickly I pressed the key with which I could toggle between running and walking. Like dressing a character in suitable clothing, walking can be understood as a code of behavior used by role-players. From forum discussions and conversations with fellow WoW role-players, I had learned that walking is not only perceived as creating a more coherent or realistic setting, it also signals "I am role-playing" instead of running around to gather experience points and level the character as fast as possible. Having pulled the camera back behind Speckles, thereby creating a third-person perspective, I tried to imagine how she felt as I made her walk to the Deeprun Tram. Archivar Eiswein had offered her a job to record the journey of the Archives in photographs, and I imagined her to be somewhat nervous. I also imagined Speckles to be carrying a large shoulder bag filled with cameras and lenses. This could not be represented graphically but I would use emotes to display emotions such as nervousness and Speckles sighing under the heavy weight of her bag. Emotes are used to let a character perform an action or display an emotion. WoW contains many standard emotes which are text commands such as `/listen` that have to be typed into the chat prompt. They result into an automatically generated text message appearing in the chat window: `Speckles listens intently to [selected character]`. Some standard emotes are accompanied by an animation that the character performs, for example, the command `/wave` will create an animation of the character waving (figure 3). Typing a sentence with a question or an exclamation mark will make the character raise either shoulders or hands. Besides using standard emotes, players can create their own emotes, which only appear as text in the chat window. These self-created emotes are used by players to enhance their performance and, simultaneously, emoting makes them visible as a role-player, just as wearing clothing and walking does. A well-known player-character named Dwoozle Kaboozle, who started out as a street thug in Stormwind, gives hints and tips on the official forum about how he uses emotes not only to describe the actions of his character (using visual cues and emphasizing other senses as well: sound, smell, taste, and touch) but also to involve others in his role-play:

Try to spice up emotes with adjectives and emphasis. Aiding another players' imagination is important. If your character just "picks up a barrel" there's no indication of how much of a struggle it might be. "Dwoozle struggles to to lift the enormous barrel" sends out a signal to other players and provides a hook for interaction. Could Dwoozle do with a hand? [...] Something I mentioned in a thread I wrote a while ago. Write a macro that's a "signature" emote.



Figure 3: Some standard emotes are accompanied by an animation that the character performs: /wave creates an animation of the character waving.

Dwoozle used to chew Silverleaf. Things came to a head with that though when he collapsed and passed out. His bad teeth are no longer a problem. Now he checks his pocket watch everytime the town bell chimes. I don't think it's quite as memorable though. Dwoozle got a certain amount of fame for his previous sigmote! Maybe it's time to think of something else. (Dwoozle Kaboozle, Argent Dawn forum, 25 August 2006)

As I was waiting for the tram to arrive I decided to get into the role of Speckles by talking to another player-character, a human male, who seemed to be waiting as well. He walked, was dressed tastefully, and emoted how he fiddled with the lute he was holding in his hands. The name tag above the character's head said his name was Laerick, but in order to make the interaction as natural as possible Speckles would not know that. "Good evening," I typed in the say channel. The text appeared both in my chat window and as a text bubble above Speckles' head, thus broadcasting my greeting to all players in the vicinity. In reply he nodded and smiled.

It was exactly 8:00 pm when Speckles arrived in Ironforge and I made her run towards city gates while emoting how she was tightly holding on to her heavy shoulder bag. Although no one might have been paying attention to my performance of Speckles I often find myself role-playing a character – even when alone – as it gives me a chance to practice performing, to develop her character, to create atmosphere, and to possibly attract other role-players.

Outside the of city gates of Ironforge I found small groups of player-characters standing on the snow-covered plateau that looks out over the mountainous area of Dun Morogh. The in-game sound effects were those of the whistling sounds of the wind and the crackling of the fire burning in braziers. It reminded me that I forgot to pick out the appropriate music to play during the caravan.

Music and multitasking

As I had been playing WoW almost every day for over 18 months I could not stand to listen to the game soundtrack anymore. I had switched it off and listened to either only the game sound effects or my own music that fitted the atmosphere but would not distract me from the game, such as ambient i-Tunes channels, Scandinavian and Irish folk music, or movie soundtracks.

I play WoW in windowed mode, which means that the game is not full screen but shows in a window, which enables the player to quickly switch between the game and other software applications. In practice this means that next to WoW I always have other programs running such as Skype, MSN, Firefox browser, Word, e-mail and a music player. While playing WoW I often switch to another application in order to look something up (for instance lore information or English words), to make notes (both role-play and research related), or to do something else when I have to wait in the game. Depending on how interesting or demanding the instrumental play or role-play is, I chat simultaneously over Skype or MSN. Zoe and I sometimes also have a phone connection open over Skype, which enables us to talk directly instead of having to type. While playing we comment on remarkable events, ask each other for advice, or we simply laugh out loud. The fact that we can always talk creates a cozy feel-

ing of sitting next to each other while playing. During events like the caravan, however, my multitasking activities are kept to a minimum – there is too much happening in-game. This meant I only switched on i-Tunes and quickly went back to the snow-covered plateau in front of the gates of Ironforge.

Waiting for the Caravan to Leave

A colorful group of player-characters had started to gather. There were gnomes on their mechanical striders, sturdy-looking dwarves, some of whom were carrying guns, humans who arrived either on foot or horse, and stylishly clad night-elves. In small groups they discussed the cold weather, Stormwind politics, and the upcoming caravan.

The screenshot and the unedited chatlog (see figure 4) of my first minutes on the plateau illustrate the interplay between the 3-D graphical environment and text in role-play. Players use a combination of text (chat and emotes) and actions in the pre-designed game environment to perform their characters. The chatlog displays some interesting things in regard to the use of language in role-play; note the dialect and phonetic writing (“Ello, dun want yer catchin a cold”), highly descriptive emotes (“Laerick takes out his lute, and starts playing a soft tune, closing his eyes”), my emote between *stars* in order to save time and keep the emote close to the chat and Regi whispering “boo” to me in Dutch (“Regi whispers: boe!”).

Argent Dawn is an English-language RP server, which means that English is the main language in all public chat channels. Player-characters can be banned from the server for not complying with this rule. Players come from all over Europe, and it sometimes shows in their use of language that they are not native speakers. However, I was often surprised at how quickly non-native speakers learned English through role-play and, just as native speakers, displayed creativity and humor in their chat and emotes. For non-native speakers, the game is often bi-lingual as they will – like Regi here – speak their native language in private channels. Between non-native-speaking players, this is sometimes a signal that the message is OOC as everything IC is in English. For another way of signaling that a message is OOC, players either put double brackets around their text: ((...)) or OOC: ... in front of it, all other text is considered to be IC and thus part of the performance. While waiting on the windy plateau I had, for instance, this conversation with someone who was concerned about Freckles’ absence:

```
9/17 20:13:10.265 Elaniya says: ((its Speckles!!! Where's Freckles?))
9/17 20:14:21.671 Elaniya whispers: ((Where's Freckles? :) ))
9/17 20:14:37.968 To Elaniya: ooc: not here =P
```

As in other forms of chat this example displays the use of emotes :) and =P. This is accepted in OOC talk but is generally seen as by role-players as an inappropriate way to display emotions in IC conversations.


Speckles tapped a male gnome on the shoulder and asked him what was going on. "Some caravan goin' somewhere" "An' from wha' i figured out tha' dwarf over there is the leader" he said, while pointing Eiswein out. I spotted the Archivar standing in front of a table that was positioned underneath a simple tent. In order to have a better look I scrolled the mouse wheel forward to turn the camera into first person perspective. The older dwarf had a long white beard and was wearing a gray robe combined with a silver-gray tabard that displayed a compass, and green gloves kept his hands warm. Player-characters had lined up to talk to him and he was using a combination of chat and emotes to hand out assignments and missions.

Gamemastering

"Oh, hello, miss Snapwiggles." Eiswein said. "Yes, hullo," I replied. "Here I am." While I waited for my turn to talk to the Archivar, the group of player-characters wanting to join the caravan grew fast and as a result it became almost impossible to follow all conversations taking place in the vicinity. I pulled the camera back to third person so I could focus on the chat of the player-characters nearby, which showed up in the text bubbles above their heads. Also, I stretched the chat window out over a fourth of my screen, buying myself more time to read the conversation taking place around Speckles. Meanwhile Eiswein ordered three scouts to check out the rumor that there were bandits seen further down the road and a sturdy-looking dwarf was commissioned to hand out water to everyone (figure 6).

In a pen-and-paper role-playing game (PnP RPG) or live action role-playing game (LARP), Eiswein would have been called the game-master (GM). In a PnP RPG the gamemaster is responsible for the setting and the system of the game. The game-master sets up adventures, describes the setting, and controls the action of non-player characters (NPCs). In WoW, the setting and the system of the game are controlled by the computer. The term game-master is reserved for customer support representatives who are online 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to assist players when they experience trouble either with the game or with other players.

As the previous chatlog showed, player-characters will spontaneously role-play interactions, often using the environment and sometimes NPCs and quests as backgrounds or triggers for their performances. This means that in WoW, players mostly negotiate role-play among themselves. Some players, however, such as Eiswein here, will organize events or set up plots, sometimes with the use of alternative characters (alts), who function in the same way as NPCs in analogue role-play. Eiswein's style of gamemastering has similarities to dramatic LARPs, in which gamemasters use the physical environment, and players who perform NPCs to create events, that is, a context in which players can interact. By handing out PCs assignments and missions, Eiswein aimed to give players a trigger to respond to and perform their characters. "Now, I will need you to take as many photographs of those that are with us here," Eiswein told Speckles. "Do not fear the price of the film you use. The Archives will pay." Eiswein continued by asking Speckles to join the Argent Archives: "Ah, that reminds me. Do you wish to wear our tabard as well? I think I have one somewhere here with your size." In so doing, he turned an OOC question, "Do you wish to join our guild?" into role-play.



Good. You, dwarf. I have a mission for you.

Figure 4: Eiswein using a combination of chat and emotes to hand out assignments and missions.

9/17 20:02:19.890 Cinandra pats the flower tucked into her hood.
9/17 20:02:23.203 Xarch says: aye
9/17 20:02:23.593 Speckles taps Sarges on the shoulder
9/17 20:02:24.093 Cinandra says: Oh aye.
9/17 20:02:24.906 Ratakar smiles at Cinandra.
9/17 20:02:27.890 Xarch says: and yersen ?
9/17 20:02:30.968 Ratakar says: I'm glad
9/17 20:02:34.156 Sarges says: 'Ello
9/17 20:02:36.593 Speckles says: Whats going on here?
9/17 20:02:42.218 Laerick takes out his lute, and starts playing a soft tune, closing his eyes
9/17 20:02:43.125 Thralion says: Shield are helpin'. Thought I join in.
9/17 20:02:47.062 Cinandra says: Had a little charm put on it, so it wont fade.
9/17 20:02:49.031 Xarch nods
9/17 20:02:54.281 Sarges says: Some caravan goin' somewhere
9/17 20:03:04.234 Ratakar says: I'm happy to hear that
9/17 20:03:08.359 Speckles says: Ah, so my lucky guess was right
9/17 20:03:17.125 You smile at Sarges.
9/17 20:03:18.031 Cinandra smiles at Ratakar.
9/17 20:03:25.062 Xarch says: be careful now thral, dun want yer catchin a cold, can be deadly at yer ole age
9/17 20:03:28.796 Xarch grins broadly
9/17 20:03:34.578 Sarges says: An' from wha' i figured out tha' dwarf over there is the leader
9/17 20:03:38.843 Sarges points at Eiswein.
9/17 20:03:43.578 Thralion says: So can every thing else.
9/17 20:03:58.156 Ratakar peers at the assembled people a bit
9/17 20:04:00.078 Bergoth says: Who wanna duel?
9/17 20:04:08.015 Bergoth says: Anyone?
9/17 20:04:13.062 Laerick sighs at Bergoth.
9/17 20:04:13.062 Speckles looks in the direction Sarges is pointing and smiles slightly
9/17 20:04:27.890 Speckles takes a deep breath
9/17 20:04:31.078 Xarch says: damned cold!
9/17 20:04:34.375 Evangeline says: I do not duel.
9/17 20:04:39.390 Bergoth smiles at Evangeline.
9/17 20:04:39.421 Regi whispers: boe!
9/17 20:04:40.593 Speckles says: *mumbles* Here we go then
9/17 20:04:48.062 Laerick says: I'm a lover, not a fighter
9/17 20:04:48.062 Speckles says: Wish me luck, eh
9/17 20:04:52.265 Sarges says: Good luck

Role-play guilds

I replied in a positive way by making Speckles say that she could try the tabard on to see if it would suit the rest of her clothes. The chatlog below (see figure 5) is edited – I pulled out only the conversation between Eiswein and Speckles. The time-stamps show the time gaps there are in the conversation. This was due to the fact that as guild leader and event organizer Eiswein was overrun with whispers from players asking what they should do: “Can I join the raid plz? When does the Caravan leave? Im going to be late. Will you wait? Whats going on here? Do I line up the guards now? Where are we going? Hi! Eiswein! Havent seen you in a long time! Whats going on?! :D” (Jørgen, comment on this text, January 2007)

```
9/17 20:18:38.812 Speckles says: What do expect of me?
9/17 20:18:46.109 Eiswein says: You have your camera with you?
9/17 20:18:51.968 You nod.
9/17 20:19:05.640 Speckles says: How could I not..thats were you wanted
to pay me for..right?
9/17 20:19:15.906 Eiswein smiles.
9/17 20:19:35.812 Eiswein says: Ah, that reminds me. Do you wish to
wear our tabard as well? I think i have one somewhere here with your
size.
9/17 20:19:58.328 Speckles says: Depends, whether it suits the rest of my
clothes or not
9/17 20:20:11.000 Speckles says: What colours does it have?
9/17 20:20:40.140 Eiswein points at his silvergrey tabard with the golden
trim and compass.
9/17 20:20:56.078 Speckles changes her shoulderbag with camera's from
her left to her right shoulder
9/17 20:21:13.078 Speckles says: Hm...could try
9/17 20:21:40.046 Eiswein smiles.
9/17 20:21:51.843 Eiswein invites you join the Argent Archives.
9/17 20:22:10.000 Eiswein says: Now, I will need you to take as many
photographs of those that are with us here.
```

Figure 5: Edited chatlog from the conversation between Eiswein and Speckles.

Only after being invited into the guild was Speckles able to wear the guild tabard which had been designed by the Eiswein in consultation with the rest of the guild shortly after it was formed. According to Blizzard Entertainment, guilds are “a collection of players who have joined together to create a mutual beneficial relationship with each other [...] Guild members benefit from each other by loaning or giving cash to each other, by trading items to each other for little or no charge, and by donating equipment to each other.”

Although most role-play guilds use WoW's guild format in this way, their primary function is to keep a group of role-players together by a common theme such as running a tavern (the Fingels Quest), being a city guard (the Stormwind City Watch), an evil alliance (the Demonologists), organized crime (the Legitimate Business Club), military force (the Stormguard), a family clan (O'Brandin), or a rescue squad (the Gnomish Rescue Squad). The guild tabard allows players to create a uniform appearance and the guild chat channel enables them to communicate easily. Their guild background stories often form the communal context in which guild members role-play:

The Legitimate Business Club (LBC)

We are a consortium of companions whom share similar beliefs as in Business, pulling funds together we look after members interests both on a Business and on a personal level, We like to think of ourselves as a Social Gathering of investors, owners and tradesman set for the betterment of Life in Stormwind and will aid as best we can to the authorities. The LBC is an underground organisation with a strong public face based around the Pig and Whistle tavern in Old Town. With an 'insurance' firm based in the dwarf district they claim both areas as their 'turf' and fiercely defend it against rival organisations. First started after the fall of the Old Town Blades the club has slowly grew to a sizable stature. (Argent Dawn Content Wiki)²³

Besides role-playing together, role-play guilds often help each other during instrumental play as well. The mutual benefit of role-play guilds is that they develop a tightly knit community for role-play, instrumental play, and OOC social relationships. This often shows through the intense use of their player-run guild forums and websites. As soon as Speckles was added to the Archives I had a look at the guild information screen. With Speckles included, the Argent Archives consisted at that moment of 14 characters. Eiswein (Jørgen) had picked most of them up by announcing the project both in-game and on the official forum; others were offline friends or players, like me, who he knew through previous role-play projects.

²³ <http://adcw.beche.se/>

Before the Argent Archives

It was in the middle of the night on a snow-covered road near Ironforge – almost a week after the release of WoW – when I met Jørgen. He was playing a gnome mage named Highfart and I was leveling my first character, a gnome warrior named Yara. While creating Yara I had been very aware of the fact that my first character would greatly determine the course that both my online role-play and research would take. However, as I could not foresee which type of character would lead me where, I simply designed the green-haired Yara based on my previous role-play experiences and a girl whom I had met that day. I was waiting in front of a traffic light with my bike when a girl about four years old sitting on the back of her mother's bike caught my attention. When her mother asked, "What does Yara want for dinner?" the girl answered – while she was looking at me – "That is not my choice to make." I smiled at the way she tried to sound both wise and determined. Besides, I agreed with her that four-year-olds should not decide what was going to be had for dinner. I had liked the name Yara for a long time already, and while I continued biking back home I considered the possibility of making this Yara into a role-play character. Due to previous tabletop role-play adventures I developed a love for the gnomish race and therefore I made Yara into a gnome, with cute looks: green eyes and green ponytails. In order to underline her strength and willpower I chose the warrior class.

Some time before the release of WoW, Zoe and I had agreed to play together once in a while. We did not know each other very well at that time, but I knew she had played in the beta version of WoW, which meant she could teach me some of the game mechanics. In turn she was curious about role-play, which hopefully I could teach her. Zoe's character Kilaomi, a night elf druid, was a remake of the character she had played in the beta.

"Kila? Where are you?" I typed into the say channel while I was gathering experience points by finishing a quest that ordered me to fight some game-generated wolves and bears. Running over a hill I noticed her standing on the road that connects Ironforge to a town called Kharanos. She was talking to a sturdy-looking dwarf and a gnome with grey hair and a mustache. The name tags above their heads learned that they were respectively called Arren and Highfart. I ran towards them and used the standard emote /smile: "Yara smiles at Highfart." Highfart...who would use such a name on RP server? I remember thinking. While Kila talked to Arren, Highfart offered Yara something to eat. He handed her a muffin by making use of the trade-interface which allows players to trade in-game money and items. Mage characters can conjure muffins, which can be used to restore health when a character gets hurt in a fight (figure 6). I clicked on the muffin and Yara started to eat. To my delight this was accompanied by an animation in which she moved her hand towards her mouth which made it look as if she was actually eating. Suddenly I remembered the /burp emote "Yara burps rudely in Highfart's face." Surprised by the rudeness of the automatically generated emote I said: "Oops, I did not mean to be that loud." Highfart laughed. As Yara's health was up to 100%, the muffin seemed not to be meant as a health-boost but as an opening for role-play. I concluded that even though Highfart's name did

not appear to be either medieval or Fantasy-like, this had to be a player with the intention to role-play. I knew this for sure when Highfart changed his language to gnomish and made Yara a compliment. All races can speak common but they can also speak their own racial language, which can only be understood by player-characters from the same race. "Yara your eyes sparkle like the metal in your chain mail. It's wonderful," could thus only be read by me as it came out as gibberish for Arren and Kilaomi. Following this, Highfart suggested we form a party in order to travel together. This form of grouping allows players to share experience points and talk only among themselves via the party chat channel. As we traveled from Kharanos to Brewnall Village, Highfart took the lead in most activities such as questing and swimming in Iceflow Lake. "Brrrrr. Cold!" He shrieked as he jumped into the lake.

Our journey only lasted for an hour, but made an enormous impression on me. The experience reminded me of the role-play I had loved during childhood pretend play: when building a treehouse in the backyard is enough to imagine living out in the wild and when flapping your arms can make you fly to long-forgotten realms. During this form of play, all sense of time seems to disappear. PnP RPGs and LARP started to fascinate me as they can sometimes create a similar sensation. I was pleasantly surprised that MMORPGs seemed to bring back the experience of childhood pretend play in an even more enthralling way.



Figure 6: Mage characters can conjure muffins, which can be used to restore health when a character gets hurt in a fight. As Yara's health was up to 100%, the muffin seemed not to be meant as a health-boost but as an opening for role-play.

At the end of our journey we rested by a campfire in Brewnall Village and, as if we were on a holiday, Highfart suggested to take some screenshots with all our characters laughing. He counted to three and we simultaneously typed in the /laugh emote to have our characters displaying our happiness. Satisfied, I turned my PC off that night, as there was not only a beautifully designed world out there to discover but also many PCs who would make the world come alive, as if it was a persistent improvisation theater. It dawned on me how interesting it could be to use the beautifully designed surroundings, the quests, the food items, and clothes as tools and props to play and narrate our own adventures. The next day I wrote Yara's background story, which would give me a context in which I could perform her.

In order to stay in touch with Highfart, I used the in-game postal system to send him a letter. Therein I narrated my instrumental progress in the game from the perspective of a Yara who was impressed by Highfart's muffins, compliments, and leadership. We ended up sending IC letters back and forth, but we would not meet again until a few weeks later. This was due to the fact that we kept our communication IC, meaning we could only meet again by coincidence or appointment.

I remember this. It was torture. But it made the gaming experience with Yara all the better. In stories characters are always sooo happy to see each other when they meet each other, then talk to each other and ask what has happened since last time. But when one constantly talk ooc through whisper this magic disappears. Why spend time doing so if you already know the answers? (Jørgen, comment on this text)

In the meantime, Highfart's name was changed into Alabast and he started a role-play guild called the ArchMages. "Did you know I started my own guild today? The Archmages had their first meeting and it was a success. I've never had more fun in my life! Maybe you would like to join us someday?" he wrote in one of his letters. When I later asked about his name change he explained that other players did not like his name much and reported him for violating the role-play policies, looking back on his decision to name his gnome Highfart, Jørgen remarked:

Highfart was.. well.. just some very bad humour from my side. I didnt want him to be a very serious character, and I wanted him to be quite energetic. Thus I named him "high" (as in the english meaning of the word) "fart" (Which means this and that in english, but "speed" in norwegian.) The name to me signified that he was both energetic and at the same time did not take himself very seriously. As I went on however, I realised that people found the name absolutely disgusting. Even if I roleplayed as best as I could and were very polite, people would give me rude gestures and tell me they would report me.. even before I said anything. (Jørgen, e-mail interview, April 2006)

Role-playing a romantic relationship

Compared to other player-characters, Alabast stood out for me because, even after Yara had joined the ArchMages, we continued to keep our conversations IC. This made the relationship that was slowly developing between the two gnomes compelling to role-play. Next to writing letters, Alabast surprised Yara with gifts and an evening picnic during which he asked her to join him for a wedding party:

```
[02:07][Alabast] says: Silvia.. a former member of my guild is getting married
[02:07][Alabast] says: Me and Kimchan recieved letters, asking us to attend to
the ceremony
[02:08][Alabast] says: we were also told to bring as many of the Guild as pos-
sible..
[02:08][Alabast] says: however..
[02:08][Yara] says: thats is wonderful for you
[02:08][Alabast] says: although I could be surrounded by Guardians, appren-
tices and other guildmembers..
[02:08][Alabast] says: nothing would honour me more than having you by my
side..
[02:09][Yara] says: really...?
[02:09]Alabast looks at Yara with anticipation.. nervous anticipation
[02:09]Yara blushes
[02:09][Yara] says: that...
[02:09][Alabast] says: heh.. having Captain Brek as my dancing-partner would-
nt be much of a show..
[02:09]You giggle.
[02:09][Alabast] says: I mean.. it would be quite a sight but..
[02:10][Yara] says: o, i would love to see that!
[02:10][Alabast] says: have you seen the man run? Anyone who runs that bad
must be quite a dreadfull dancer
[02:10]You giggle.
[02:10][Alabast] says: I would rather hold your hand during the ceremony.. if
you wouldnt mind..
[02:10]Alabast smiles shyly at you.
[02:10]You smile shyly.
[02:11]Yara blushes even more
```

Figure 7: Unedited chatlog from a conversation between Alabast and Yara.

Love affairs are a common theme in both tabletop role-playing games and LARPs, however, in online role-play, romance seems to be one of the most important subjects. In-game wedding ceremonies are a form of role-play that not only take place on RP servers but also on PvE and PvP servers. Although on these servers the wedding refers not so much to the relationship between characters but between players, whereas on RP servers the first intention is role-play and not the development of a relationship

between players, although this is sometimes the effect. Love affairs in role-play can create a positive tension but can also be a resource for conflicting feelings over the interrelation between IC and OOC, in-game and out of game, online and offline. Romance is an often mocked theme on the forums: role-players involved in IC relationships are accused of an OOC interest in "zyb0ring" (cybersex) and zyb0ring is often used as a way to mock role-play in itself.

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 as well. Because we kept our conversations IC, the role-played relationship was not only more "realistic", I also felt more secure that there could be no confusion between IC and OOC. To me it was enough to know that I liked the role-play style of the player who was performing Alabast; he or she made me laugh and thus I enjoyed performing a shy gnomette in love. That the player behind Alabast felt the same way as I did became clear when he posted a question for travel hints and tips on the official role-play forum. Another player responded by informing about the gender of Yara's player:

Bloody muffins! I cannot find a single travel bureau in Stormwind! I just promised my dear love Yara to travel with her around the world and see what it has to offer. But I cant even find a bloody map for this task! Any guides and hints will be appreciated. (Alabast, Argent Dawn forum, 9 October 2005)

In normal pvp/pve servers, 80% of the female characters has a guy playing it. I guess its different on RP. Or is it? (Fukkstar, Argent Dawn forum, 10 October 2005)

Yara is for all I know a dutch 50 year old child-canibal. She could be a 21 year guy boy with driving disabilities. She could be my mom for all I know!! But this is a RP server, so I dont care who it is. All I know its a great RPer which should be treated respectfully. Yara! You are the best!! (Alabast, Argent Dawn forum, 10 October 2005)

My preference for keeping all role-play IC was strengthened when a male dwarf fell in love with Yara. The interracial element and his growing jealousy of Alabast could have been interesting hooks for role-play, but I decided to end our interactions when he simultaneously started to talk OOC to me while sending love letters to Yara. However, in regard to Alabast I realized that if I wanted to write about my experiences from Yara's perspective that I had to talk OOC to the player in order to get his consent and be able to interview him. Eventually I decided to take the risk of ruining our role-play by telling Alabast who I was and that I was writing a PhD on role-play in online games. Luckily he responded in positive way; he thought my research was "quite exciting" and from that point on he patiently answered my questions and commented on my writings.

Jørgen turned out to be Norwegian and living in Canada where he is studying creative advertising. He has a background in gamemastering PnP RPGs and describes himself as someone who loves to create enthralling experiences for other players:

I would describe myself more like a gamemaster than a player. I play the game since I want to see storylines unfold. Others storylines. I want to see other characters develop, I want to see other people have experiences, I want to enhance other peoples stories. When people whisper me with: "Your character is sooo funny" or "You should be proud. People are arguing over what to do with you.", that is when I smile and become encouraged to play on. (Jørgen, e-mail interview, April 2006)

Role-play development

Next to organizing activities, ranging from guild meetings to sieges and fishing trips for the ArchMages, Jørgen made Alabast highly visible on *Argent Dawn* by organizing meetings for the guildmasters of different role-play guilds.

The turnout was both its greatest success and its greatest downfall. Because of the sheer amount of players that showed up, nothing could be decided upon. It was also a great deal of conflicts of interest. Some people wanted to RP the whole thing. (Made impossible by those who wanted to go home/not RP). Some wanted to simply organize events. (Made impossible by those who regarded the gathering as a anti-horde military gathering.) Etc etc. All in all there were too many people and too many points of view. (Jørgen, comment on this text, January 2007)

After a few attempts that ended in chaos, he focused on his own guild again and decided that, in order to generate more role-play, the ArchMages needed a theme. Thus he started The Academy of the ArchMages as an in-game school where new PCs could take classes ranging from fighting to learning the elfish language taught by the members of the ArchMages. His descriptions of the guild, as posted on the server forum, showed the way in which Jørgen's perception of role-play guilds was changing from "role-play and comradeship" to "more than a bunch of friends". Over time he found out that one way to make a role-play guild successful was to come up with a theme that structures the behavior of players. Therefore the later Academy of the ArchMages revolved around lessons given by members, these lessons formed the trigger for role-play:

The ArchMages

The ArchMages in game purpose is to "Forge a Unity between Steel and Magic, bent at destroying the evil that threatens the civilized lands of the Realm." We are divided into several divisions which cooperates to further aid the goals of the Guild. Every class is accepted, but Warlocks would have a really hard time to explain why they would join us. (from an in game perspective of course.) In the end we are a guild who values nothing but true roleplay and comradeship. If you like to use words like "W8" and "Can I join U plz, need this quest to" you have no business here. Argent Dawn is a rp-server and should stay that way. (Alabast, Argent Dawn forum, 15 April 2005)

The Academy of the ArchMages

These days the guild of the ArchMages is reforming its ranks to become more than a regular "bunch of friends" guild. We will now soon open the Academy of the ArchMages which will offer promising and young adventurers a place for learning, adventuring and comradeship. The accepted students will participate in a two week program where they learn everything from baking murloc-muffins to urban survival skills. Very soon the first trial of the Academy will take place. If you apply now you have a chance of being in the first class of the Academy! All you need to do is write Principal Alabast an in game mail stating who you are and why you would like to be a student. You will then be contacted in game with more information on where and when the trial will take place. (Alabast, Argent Dawn forum, 20 May 2005)

Jørgen's project after the Academy of the ArchMages, was the Stormwind City Watch. Having learned that themed guilds worked best and inspired by both his army background and his studies in creative advertising he started this strictly organized police organization in the capital city. The Watch was run by his arrogant night-elf named Nath Shadoweyes. Also, he played one of the human sergeants, M.B. Eldal, who he designed after a sergeant he knew in the army.

I always wanted to form a military guild. Due to my RL background [in the army, MC] I have great respect and appreciation of rules, regulations and teamwork. There is nothing more beautiful than a group of people working towards the same goal. [...] I investigated the situation in Stormwind. At first I wanted to create a tradesmans guild. But since my advertising program have learned me one thing: Look for the creneau. (Look for the hole) I regarded the other guilds in Stormwind first. I found a lot of heroic generic guilds, some demon worshippers, some secret orders and some criminal guilds like the Old Town Blades. When Nath entered Stormwind he had therefore a plan: Create a townsguard, but recruit corrupt people and create a group of criminals that will keep the need for the townsguard present. My plan was to give Stormwind 2 things I believed it lacked: An opposition to the rest of the criminal guilds and a hardcore roleplaying concept. Nath was designed to be a villain, a character that would drive other peoples lives forward. Someone who would stay in the background and enhance

the overall atmosphere of Stormwind. My aims were to collect a group of so hardcore roleplayers that they would not even ask for an ooc channel. If it is the right way to run a guild, or the best one can be debated. Truth is, it worked. The Watch was (because of its amazing members) a success and has been copied even in other realms. (Jørgen, e-mail interview, April 2006)

The guild attracted new recruits on a daily basis who were only accepted after an IC job interview in which the player had to display his or her role-play capacities. Next to the daily assignment of patrolling the streets Jørgen had designed a plot behind the Watch in which Nath Shadoweyes had less noble plans with his newly started police force. Over time the player-characters who interacted with the Watch slowly discovered Shadoweyes' plans and eventually he was trailed and banned under his own laws. Jørgen handed the leadership of the Watch over to another player-character, went back to Norway for the summer and decided he should quit playing WoW as the time investment was becoming too much.

I was surprised to receive an MSN message at the end of the summer in which Jørgen stated "I am afraid to start WoWing again"; he had a plan to create more role-play on the server and told me his idea for the Argent Archives "a guild consisting of a travelling group of storytellers, journalists, merchants and their bodyguards." His plan was to organize every weekend a small gathering where the guild could tell stories, trade goods and give news and weather forecasts. "The stories they tell are short and revolve around real players that they've met in their travels. The storytellers are looking for great tales. Great heroes. Real people. Not NPCs or powermoters with big egos." This way he hoped to discover new role-play talent on the *Argent Dawn* server and encourage their play. Furthermore he aimed to record these role-players and their stories on a website, in order to create a portal into server's role-play communities. "We tell tales of you; the people of AD [Argent Dawn, MC]. And of course, under all this, there is a story and a greater plot, the same way Shadoweyes were having a greater scheme with the Watch. So there will be enough for the guildmembers and its freelancers and affiliates to do as well." "Would you have a character interested in joining me?" he asked. (Jørgen, MSN conversation, August 2006) I decided that it would be most logical to join the Argent Archives with Speckles as she could portray both the caravan and the citizens of Azeroth. This is how Speckles ended up on the windy plateau in front of the gates of Ironforge.

I looked around and noticed more and more delegates from role-play guilds arriving, and when it was time to leave approximately 30 player-characters had gathered. While a cacophony of IC and OOC conversations was taking place, Eiswein started to yell out the tasks for each guild and individual traveling with the caravan:

Ok, time to get this on the road. Please, hold your mouths and have patience with me. All non mercenaries, scholars, noncombatants, archivars, librarians, nobles, merchants and whatnot, gather around the table behind me. All fighting forces, have a good look at them, these are the people you will be protecting. [...] Ok. This is the situation. There are rumors of bandits in the area, even members from the Horde. This means we need to keep quiet when we hit the road. No orders are to be yelled except from me, the leader of the Shield and the leader of the Squad. [...] Squad: Your priority is the City Watch Messenger. Protect him at all costs. Your position in the caravan is the far back. Archives gather around me. Guards: To your positions. We leave in 2 minutes.

Meanwhile he had added all participants to a raid group. Raids are groups of more than five PCs and are typically used to defeat unique challenges, such as slaying a dragon, at high levels. On the forum, Eiswein announced that he would use raidchat to “describe different atmospheric details as the caravan travels on.” It was time to start the journey.

The Caravan Hits the Road

Slowly the caravan started to move over the road that leads down into the snow-white valleys of Dun Morogh. Archivar Eiswein had ordered the scouts to stay one minute ahead in order to make sure there were no bandits waiting to attack the caravan with all its valuables. As player-characters chatted with each other Eiswein gave the first descriptions to add to the shared imagination of the group.

9/17 20:41:15.015 [Raid Leader] Eiswein: A snowfall have made the paths outside the road thick and hard to walk in. The caravan itself consists of the archivars and librarians, all pushing the wagons in front of them or pulling a cart stuffed with books.

Meanwhile players performed their characters, sometimes making use of the descriptions that Eiswein gave and vice versa, as a gamemaster Eiswein responded to the actions of players. These edited parts of the chatlog show for instance the ways in which role-play and gamemastering was shaping a shared fantasy:

Making music

9/17 20:46:21.031 Laerick sings a lonesome song, playing a sad tune on his lute
9/17 20:46:56.578 Milthas takes up a harmonica and starts to play a tune.... It blends in the cold wind.
9/17 20:47:43.765 [Raid Leader] Eiswein: The frosty tune from Milthas harmonica can be heard throughout the whole caravan.
9/17 20:48:08.234 Teedot finds the tune comforting in the cold.
9/17 20:48:28.078 Milthas looks at Laerick smiling slightly.
9/17 20:48:46.515 Laerick mutter something about paladins getting more recognition in an army, combat and music.

Taking snapshots

9/17 20:42:51.234 Albie waves at you.
9/17 20:42:58.562 [Raid Leader] Eiswein: A member of the Archives, Speckles, is running around taking snapshots of the group. Sometimes a flash blinds you and makes seeing through the snowy weather even harder.
9/17 20:43:01.718 You wave at Albie.
9/17 20:43:10.562 Speckles says: Hello!
9/17 20:43:16.875 Speckles says: How good to see you here
9/17 20:43:28.765 Albie says: Same to you, miss Snapwiggle
9/17 20:43:42.140 Speckles smiles holding up her camera
9/17 20:43:52.296 Albie says: Snap duties today?
9/17 20:43:56.406 Speckles says: Yes, this is hopefully a job that pays well
9/17 20:44:01.328 Albie nods at you.

Figure 8: Edited chatlog which shows the ways in which role-play and gamemastering was shaping a shared fantasy.

IC Eiswein had asked Speckles to document the trip in snapshots "so that nothing becomes lost or forgotten." This not only meant that I would perform the role of photographer but also that I would take screenshots during the event. Later Jørgen used the screenshots taken by both himself and others to make what he calls a photo reel, a report of the caravan (figure 9). Zoe and I do something similar with our Snap Sisters project; we go to events, perform our roles as photographers, take screenshots and edit these into reports.

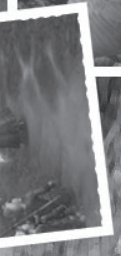




Figure 9: Photo reel of the second march of the Argent Archives (below). (Jørgen Støvne 2006)
Also available at: <http://argentarchives.net/secondmarch/>

REG 01

WE LEFT THE GATES OF IRONFORGE.
THE SHIELD, BLADES AND
THE GUARD ON OUR FLANKS,
THE SQUAD GUARDING THE REAR
AND THE MERCENARIES UP FRONT.



CROSSING THROUGH
DUN MOROGH
EVERYTHING SEEMED
FINE AT FIRST
EXCEPT FOR A COLD
UNLIKE ANYTHING
I'VE SEEN
IN THESE PARTS
FOR A WHILE.



TWO GOOD FRIENDS

Come, let's go!

BOOTS!

THE QUARRY

I FELT A LOT SAFER
WITH LADS
WITH THIS AROUND!
LIKE THIS AROUND!
← SWORD
OF
FICK. ARSE
← DETERMINED
LOOK

← HAND
MADE
SHOULDER
PADS

← SIZE 67!

AS WE PASSED THE QUARRY A SCOUT GAVE ME TWO
PIECES OF DIRE NEWS.
BANDITS HAD BEEN SPOTTED IN FHRANOS.



TWO GOOD FRIENDS
Come here go!

BOOTSIES
RESCUE PARTY

THE QUARRY

AS WE PASSED THE QUARRY A SCOUT GAVE ME TWO
PIECES OF DIRE NEWS:
BANDITS HAD BEEN SPOTTED IN KHARANOS.
BOOISE, THE TOMEKEEPER WAS FOR UNKNOWN REASONS
STILL IN IRONFORGE!

SIZE 67!

NOT ZUBIN...
HOPE...

CITY WATCH
MESSENGER

DISPATCHING A TRIO OF
MERCENARIES TO LOCATE
THE TOMEKEEPER, I SENT
THE SHIELD OF LIGHT TO
KHARANOS TO ROOT OUT THE
BANDIT'S. A GRAVE MISTAKE...

AT ALL
TIMES
SOME
MERCENARY
WITH A
WOLFHEAD
LED THE
MERCENARIES.

EVERYTHING SEEMED CALM AT FIRST.
BUT ONLY SECONDS AFTER THE FIRST
SCOUT REPORTED OF UNDEADS IN THE
AREA THE FIRST ATTACK CAME UPON
THE CARAVAN. THE TOMEKEEPER GOT
A GOOD NOGGIN ON THE HEAD AND
BRAVE MERCENARIES GAVE THEIR
BLOOD WHILE PROTECTING US!

SPECIES GOT A GOOD
SHOT OF THE
BANDIT LEADER

BANDIT'S!

IT HAPPENED SO FAST.
FIRST THE MESSAGE OF AN
ATTACK AT OUR REAR MADE
THE CIVILLIAN PART OF THE
CARAVAN PRESS ON WITHOUT
MUCH PROTECTION AT THE FRONT.
WHEN WE FINALLY LEFT THE SOUTH
GATE PASS THE BANDIT'S WERE OVER US!
BUT BEFORE TOO MANY VALUABLES WERE

SPECKLED... OF THE... BANDIT LEADER

ATTACK AT OUR REAR MADE THE CIVILIAN PART OF THE CARAVAN PRESS ON WITHOUT MUCH PROTECTION AT THE FRONT. WHEN WE FINALLY LEFT THE SOUTH GATE PASS THE BANDITTS WERE OVER US! BUT BEFORE TOO MANY VALUABLES WERE ROBBED, THE HORDE CAME DOWN UPON THE ALREADY CHAOTIC GROUP AND ALLOWED FOR THE ARCHIVES ESCAPE.

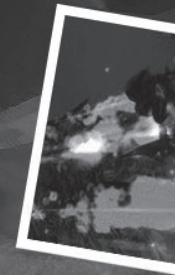


THANK THE LIGHT FOR THE SHIELD OF ER... LIGHT

THE CARAVAN QUICKLY GATHERED ITSELF AFTER THE AMBUSH AND PRESSED ON TO THELSAMAK AND... SAFETY?

THELSAMAKS IN FLAMES!

THE MAIN FORCE OF THE HORDE CAME US HELL WHEN WE ARRIVED IN THELSAMAK





THELSAMAR IN FLAMES!

THE MAIN FORCE OF THE HORDE
GAVE US HELL WHEN WE
ARRIVED IN THELSAMAR

THE CARAVAN QUICKLY GATHERED
ITSELF AFTER THE AMBUSH AND
PRESSED ON TO THELSAMAR AND...
SAFETY?

SWOOSH!
KRAKOW!
KERPLASCH!

LUCKILY THE
GUARDS
KNEW HOW
TO GIVE
THE HORDE
HELL AS
WE'LL NOT TO
MENTION
HOW GREAT
WE LOOK
WITHOUT
A SHIRT ON!

COMPENSATING FOR
SOMETHING?

BALDI!

AMARAL
AND
TIMBLE
SHANKS
TOOK
A STAND!

THE IRONTOOTH GUARD
DID WHAT THEY DID BEST
GUARDING!



A MILLION THANKS TO THE HEALER WHO TENDED TO THE WOUNDED!

THE IRONORGE GUARD BROUGHT THE ARCHIVES INTO SAFETY INSIDE THE INN WHILE THE MERCENARIES AND PALADINS ASSISTED BY THE RESQUE SQUAD DEFENDED THE VILLAGE. THE BATTLE WAS FIERCE AND WILL BE REMEMBERED IN OUR SONGS. I CANNOT BUT WONDER THOUGH... WHAT WILL HAPPEN AS WE VENTURE FURTHER AWAY FROM CIVILIZED LANDS?

MERCS! yer gettin paid well tonight



<http://argentiarchives.net> - Your Portal to Argent Dawn

The Snap Sisters

Zoe and I started the Snap Sisters in January 2006 as two gnome sisters who had just returned from a long journey and decided to rent the top floor of the Visitor's Center in Stormwind. We did not consider the Snap Sisters as a research project. As friends we wanted to do something together and as role-players we aimed to participate and contribute more actively to the role-play community of *Argent Dawn*. However, our friendship, our experiences as role-players, and, of course, our academic backgrounds also helped to shape the project and, in turn, these aspects were influenced by our experience with the Sisters.

The Snap Sisters started out as fashion photographers because Zoe and I share a fascination for both photography and street fashion. Inspired by (online) magazines for street fashion photography such as the Japanese *FRUiTS* and the Finnish *HEL LOOKS*, we came up with idea of a role-play fashion magazine called *Stormy Fashion*. This was plausible because photography is part of the narrative environment of WoW. There is a quest in which players are commissioned to take a snapshot with the "Super Snapper FX." The camera is a device made by gnomes, a race which is renowned for their knowledge of mechanics. Which is why we chose to play gnomish photographers as that would make it possible for Freckles and Speckles to invent their own cameras. A few months after the start of the project we posted the following character background story onto the *Argent Dawn* Content Wiki (ADCW), a collection of player-generated content from our server:

Freckles and Speckles Snapwiggles are twin sisters and photographers. Having spent most of their childhood in Ironforge, they started travelling a few years ago. Inspired by their father's paintings and mother's engineering devices they experimented from an early age with photographic paper in their home-workshop (Freckles called it room - or box photography). In Booty Bay they bought the Snap-O-Rama 3000, a camera developed by miss Cracklebell Sparklecog. That moment their love for photography really took off. On a warm summer evening in Southshore they came up with the idea of a photo studio and a projection device, which they later called the Beam-O-Rama. Stormwind seemed the place best suited for their business and a few months later (January) they rented the top floor of the Stormwind Visitor's Center in Trade District. (ADCW)²⁴

The gnome Cracklebell Sparklecog is a player-character who introduced the Snap-O-Rama 3000 camera both in her role-play in-game (she was a gnomish inventor) as well as on the official server forum where she made an IC post to show photos (screenshots) taken during her many travels. Inspired by her ideas we made up other cameras such as the Snaps H60 (with zoom lens) and the Snaparoid (a Polaroid camera). Our aim with the Snap Sisters was to trigger role-play with our performance. Also, we set out to document the wide variety of characters and stories that are being enacted by players on the server.

²⁴ <http://adcw.beche.se/tiki-index.php>

Player-generated content

Players document role-play characters and experiences in drawings, stories, screenshot modifications, machinima and podcasts which they often post either on the official server forum or on one of the various player-run forums. This is player-generated content in two ways; first of all, players shape the identity of their characters both in background stories and through role-play, secondly, they represent their own content in artwork. Neither, however, exists separately from the game world; the characters and role-play are inspired by and are only possible through WoW; also, the artwork is often heavily inspired by the narrative and graphical context of the game, or makes direct use of screenshots and animation.

Players who post their artwork mostly receive very positive responses and talented artists are commissioned by other players to portray their characters. This is often done in return for in-game money which otherwise is earned by questing and the sale of items and clothes through the in-game auction house. In their writings, players often tell their own IC story, to which PCs respond by telling their story. This practice shows how networks of player-characters are formed within which players perform their characters. In order to encourage players to expand their role-play beyond these networks, a player-character named Tismet Embers started the above-mentioned ADCW.

It would not be a huge collection of official lore content, because there are several already, but instead a web of articles about families, relationships and histories connected to player characters. I have some experience in using wikis to create and expand worlds for pen-and-paper RPGs, and I think it would be possible to reach consensus about what is generally acceptable content and what is not (the half-vampires, NPC bastards, fake royalty, you know what I'm talking about...). I think it would be great to be able to make connections between my newly created character and the character of a player I don't know, through eg family history or something similar, connections that would be acceptable to everyone involved because you would have a place to discuss it until you've agreed (or agreed to disagree in-game, of course!) on what the connection looks like. (Tismet, Argent Dawn forum)

This quote underlines the fact that player-generated content is not a free-for-all practice. Taking the lore written by designers as a starting point, players negotiate and make up their own rules about what is "generally acceptable content and what is not." Especially during the first months of the server, the official forum was home to intense discussions on whether for instance the stories of (half) vampires or player-characters who imagined they descended from a powerful NPC were acceptable player-generated content. Players who do not act according to the general consensus are sometimes ignored and are thus forced to change their character or story. However, there are networks of player-characters who agree on rules that deviate from the general consensus on the server that enables a player to perform their character only within this specific social context.

Player-run newspapers and magazines

Another popular way to document role-play is by publishing online newspapers and magazines. As it is a time-consuming activity to gather content and design publications on a regular basis, they often exist only for a few months. For a while, *Argent Dawn* had a player-run newspaper called *The Voice* (March-July 2006). The newspaper was run with blogging software by Arving, a German communications student, for whom the project was part of his University diploma thesis. His aim was to experiment with taking *Argent Dawn* as a real world and a source of news. Thus, unlike newspapers run by role-players on other RP servers, *The Voice* included IC role-play news as well as OOC interviews with players on their instrumental play.²⁵ Arving's goal with *The Voice* was not only to contribute to the community of the server, but also to learn more about news publications. This dual motivation can be found in almost all players who document their characters and stories. It is experienced as a practice in writing, drawing, or moviemaking, and peer-to-peer comments are appreciated and used to further develop a practice. Even though all of these practices exist outside of the game, they are the result of events in-game and in turn they affect not only the artistic skills of the players but also play and social relations in-game.

In order to integrate player-generated content in the game besides chat and emotes, role-players make use of different player-made interface add-ons. Blizzard Entertainment encourages players to program add-ons or modifications of the basic user interface of the game. The changes range from the purely cosmetic to the way things are displayed on the screen, or they provide additional information or functionality. Often used in role-play are FlagRSP (Florian Kruse, 2005), MyRoleplay (Moncader, 2006), and Ephemeral (Slaighe, 2005). Both FlagRSP and MyRoleplay allow players to add role-play specific features about their characters (such as surname, title, outward appearance, preferred role-play style: casual or hardcore, character status: IC or OOC) which can only be seen by other users of these add-ons. Ephemeral allows players to create items such as books, props, containers, keys, and instruments. These user-created items can be sent to other users of the add-on. Ephemeral, for instance, is used by the Stormwind City Watch to distribute their Book of Laws, and the human warlock Kalistra O'Brandin, a sharp-tongued journalist, uses Ephemeral to sell her IC articles and interviews for in-game money. For a while she could often be found standing on one of the corners of Trade District in Stormwind, where I recognized her immediately by the indigo outfit that she is often wearing. Kalistra became a well-know player-character when she started with a series of series of IC interviews with characters in November 2005, calling herself the chronicler of *The Azeroth Portrayer* (TAP, see figure 10 for an excerpt of one of Kalistra's interviews).²⁶

²⁵ Gizmopolitan, a lifestyle magazine for women (EU Earthen Ring server, <http://www.gizmopolitan.co.uk/>) and Azerothian Weekly, a newspaper (EU Moonglade server, <http://www.azerothianweekly.com/>).

²⁶ As Freckles and Speckles Snapwiggles, Zoe and I developed a bond with Kalistra both IC and OOC. IC-ly she became an important collaborator of the sisters and OOC-ly we built a TAP website in which we gathered the interviews, articles, and stories that she wrote. The articles of *The Azeroth Portrayer* can be found here: <http://www.play.blogs.com/tap/>.

Sgt. Eldal greets me with a voice not dissimilar from what I expected: warm toned, quite strong and with an accent that anyone could place somewhere south-west of the capital. For those who never met him personally, Eldal is in his middle-age, a corpulent man of sturdy built with short greying hair and lively blue eyes, gleaming with an authoritative yet pleasant expression. He straightens up, holding a notebook he will grasp as a precious possession during the whole interview, and after a quick briefing with one of his officers, he nods to me to proceed upstairs where the interview will take place. I sit on a little stool – furniture is remarkably scarce in the room – but Eldal slightly tightens his uniform belt and says: “I prefer to stand... it keeps me fit and ready for duty.”

While I sip the coffee from the mug I have been kindly offered, I start with the first question:

TAP: “How old are you, and where you were born?”

Eldal: “About the exact age, I cannot be precise... around forty-five. It is a bit of a paradox that I have never stopped and considered that thoroughly. But I do not know for sure. As for the place, I was born in Westfall.”

TAP: “The granary of Azeroth... once quite a peaceful place. There was in your childhood some episode that triggered in you the wish of becoming a constable?”

Eldal: “My parents were killed by the undead, and now I am here hoping to slay my inner demons...” - Eldal takes a deep breath and sighs - “No. There was no such incident. I wish I had some exciting story to tell but in fact I lived quite a boring life. I.. erm, applied for training at the Cathedral when I was fourteen and ...”

Figure 10: Excerpt from Kalistra O’Brandin’s first interview with Sergeant M.B. Eldal (December 2005).

With the Snap Sisters, Zoe and I aimed to keep our activities IC and therefore wanted our report to be part of the role-play discourse of the server. However, Ephemeral cannot hold pictures and therefore we decided to use blogging software, not in the least part because we felt it was useful to learn the functioning of this software. In order to make the blog part of the narrative world of Azeroth we came up with the idea of the Beam-O-Rama, a gnomish projection device which can be found in the office we claimed in the Visitor’s Center. In this house, which is located at the main road in the capital’s Trade District, players can find NPCs who help them to form a guild and design and buy tabards. The top floor is empty and we “claimed” this to be our office, imagining that we would pay rent to someone.

WoW is a static game world, which means that, unlike many other online role-playing games, players cannot build their own houses or even decorate existing ones. However, there are many rooms and houses throughout Azeroth that players will use in role-play, for instance by negotiating ownership over a location. Most commonly this is done with taverns where players run their own businesses. In Stormwind there are a couple of player-run inns, such as the Fingels Quest, where player-characters can come in for a drink and a chat. The Fingels Quest was started in August 2005 by the gnome player-character, Fingelsbrew Steepsprocket. When I heard about the tavern Yara wrote Fingelsbrew a letter: “Dear mister Steepsprocket, I heard you’re going to open a tavern in the Park of Stormwind City. Are you still looking for personnel? I have some time on my hands and could use a job.” After a successful job interview she started to work in the tavern.

Playing and researching WoW

Fingelsbrew was played by Jonte (18, Swedish) who started the Fingels Quest while he was finishing high school. Just like Arving, he used his gaming experience for a project in school, in which he studied the community of *Argent Dawn* and narrated his own experiences with Fingelsbrew and the Fingels Quest. Arving and Fingelsbrew are not the only players who studied WoW; through the forums players often ask for help in a WoW research project that they are doing in the context of their studies. This may not be surprising considering the fact that a large part of WoW's player population is made up of students (Yee 2006). Jonte's research into the community of *Argent Dawn* underlined again that there are different playing styles, which he divided into player groups of role-players, PvP-ers, and raiders:

The players I have interviewed say that they benefit from playing WoW and loose from it, some loose time when they should be studying (I recognize this myself) and for some it dampens their social life. But some of the benefits are like those which can be reached with meditation or even study (typing English for example). Thus it comes both good and bad from playing, but one must always be watchful so that he/she does not get addicted to the game. The community is, according to the interviews, a friendly one, but divided into different blocks, RP'ers, PvP'ers and Raiders. Neither this was a huge surprise to me, although I hadn't thought of Raiders as a block of their own, but more mixed into the PvP'ers, so that was a very interesting aspect for me. (From 2006, 30)

After reading Jonte's ethnography on the Fingels Quest I was struck not only by the enormous effort he had made to create a coherent role-play experience but also by the ways in which he described how online role-play is time consuming yet worthwhile because of the excitement of unexpected events and the feedback from other players. Jonte started out by performing Fingelsbrew as a waiter in an inn filled with NPCs:

Now those of you who are familiar to the game might ask yourselves "How can you serve in a tavern?" The answer is very easy; every time anyone entered the Blue Recluse [an NPC-run tavern in Stormwind, MC] I stood there, using my macro which I got fairly quickly, "Welcome

to the Blue Recluse! I am Fingelsbrew, the waiter. Please take a seat and I will be with you shortly.” Most of the players then seated themselves and I went forward to get their orders. I couldn’t make any brews myself, and thus only sold what the NPC-bartender-vendor sold (5 different alcoholic beverages). I was using a building which had many NPC’s in it and pretended to be one of the staff. (From 2006, 102)

However, he enjoyed the experience so much that he started his own tavern in an empty building after he had role-played how he was fired from The Blue Recluse:

After much comforting and about 200 drinks later my good friend Cracklebell (who’s actually Fingels “cousin”... well sort of) came up with the idea that I should open up a business of my own. I liked the idea but I had nowhere to be in. That’s when Cracklebell’s fiancé came up with the empty tavern in the Park District, there was only one guild that was there and I often had them as customers, so it would be no big deal in talking them in to letting me being there a few hours a week. (From 2006, 104)

After more than a year Jonte decided to quit playing WoW, because working on the Fingels Quest had taken its toll: “I had let the game take over a major part in my life, I denied party-invitations because I ‘had’ to be logged in every day, otherwise I might miss something. I got to bed extremely late and missed much school and social life because of it” (From 2006, 109). After Fingelsbrew was murdered in an event set up by Jonte, other players continued the Fingels Quest.

Inspired by the example of the Fingels Quest, Zoe and I also decided to claim ownership over an in-game location as we felt this would add to the realistic coherence of our company; it would be a place other role-players could always find us, without having to answer OOC whispers asking for our whereabouts. In the office, the Beam-0-Rama is represented by a painting. When a PC comes by to view his or her photos we emote how we switch the device on and the painting changes into the different photos. Through OOC whispers we then redirect players to our website.



Figure 11: The twinsister photographers Freckles and Speckles Snapwiggles. Zoe and I started the Snap Sisters in January 2006 as two gnome sisters who had just returned from a long journey and decided to rent the top floor of the Visitor's Center in Stormwind.

After leveling Freckles and Speckles to level 8, Zoe and I simply started our performance of the Snap Sisters by asking well-dressed characters on the streets of Stormwind if we could take a snapshot of them. While one of us played the photographer, the other one would pull out a notebook and ask fashion-related questions such as, “Where did you buy those lovely green boots?” In the first week after we created the Snap Sisters, we did our performance for a few hours every evening in order to gather enough material for the first edition of Stormy Fashion.

One unfortunate evening we ended up being hunted down by a dwarven hunter and his tiger. In a panic we ran over the streets of Azeroth until we had the idea to hide in the office of the Stormwind City Watch. After being saved by one of the constables and reporting the crime, we were invited to the Lakeshire Sport Event the following day. This player-run event was organized by the human player-character Jorendo Ashgard, who had claimed the small town of Lakeshire as his home. Stormwind had grown to be the main location for role-play and his aim with the Lakeshire Sport Event was to create more role-play throughout the enormous 3D environment of Azeroth. We photographed the event which consisted of fighting, swimming, and a fishing contest, and made a report about it that we posted on our blog, which we then advertised through both the official and player-run forums. Shortly after we published the edition of Stormy Fashion, Freckles and Speckles soon became visible characters and our in-game mailbox started to fill up with requests to shoot other sports events, portraits, and wedding photography. While our roles often trigger role-play by others, their requests are in turn triggers for our role-play, such as Eiswein asking Speckles if she could document the caravan.

The Caravan Continues

While we were still waiting for the caravan to leave I had time to change my game settings into what I call "photography-mode". "With or without chat bubbles?" I asked Eiswein through an OOC whisper. "Without please," he replied; I turned off not only the chat bubbles but also the name tags above character's heads. By pressing two keys I could now easily toggle between an image of the game with interface and a "clean" image without interface, chat window, name tags, or chat bubbles. As we started to move down the road I was ready to begin my snapwork.

By using both chat and emotes I performed Speckles' role as a photographer. As part of my performance, I encouraged player-characters to use animated emotes in order to make the images livelier. Meanwhile I would toggle to the image of the game without the interface, and I turned my camera view to first-person perspective so I could make the screenshots look as if they were snapshots taken by the Snap-O-Rama 3000. While I move the camera with my mouse, I look for interesting shots, thinking about the types of photos Speckles would make, as well as looking for the right framing and lighting of a shot. While continuously pressing the printscreen key, I captured every possibly interesting image. Once in a while I would emote a change of cameras. Zoe and I had introduced the Snaps H60 camera with a "zoom lens." This zoom lens is an in-game item called `<ornate spyglass>` which allows players to look far into the distance. We often take screenshots by making use of this item as it not only enables us to take screenshots from a distance but also because it lightens up the colours. While doing in-game photography I often feel the same way as when taking photos in a physical environment. The computer screen simulates the screen on the back of a digital camera and, by concentrating on the images, I feel in both cases as if I am shut off from my surroundings. In-game this feeling is enhanced by the fact that, without the interface on, I am unable to read the conversations that are occurring.

Focusing on taking the right snapshots, I barely noticed Eiswein yelling: "Take a right. We are camping at the quarry for a few minutes." "Stay alert. We move out in five minutes. Rest and fill your waterbottles." The caravan turned right and entered the Gol'Bolar Quarry for a break. Albie of the Gnomish Rescue Squad heaved a relieved sigh: "Ah...coffees," while the City Watch messenger Tinkerton shared his thoughts: "I do hope there is a gift shop." I smiled, because I enjoy it when players manage to perform humor by playing around with the Fantasy setting. WoW allows for this as WoW designers themselves played with Fantasy conventions by including "easter eggs" (hidden messages in media products) that refer to pop culture. Using the standard emote `/dance` on humans, for example, results in an animation of a dance similar to John Travolta's moves in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977).

A Break at the Gol'Bolar Quarry

"Some troggs outside the quarry, ahead. I'll get a few, but be careful when ye set back out!" We had barely entered the quarry when the human PC Thralion warned the caravan about the troggs wandering around. Troggs are simple humanoid life forms that, according to WoW lore, are the result of a failed experiment from the Titans to create life from stone. The Gol'Bolar Quarry is a large dig site and home to a small dwarven camp of the Miner's League. These NPCs hand out quests to exterminate the troggs which have overrun the mines and excavation site. By warning everyone about the troggs, Thralion made the creatures part of the caravan's adventure, thus creating his own quest. While others sat down near a campfire, a group of guards and mercenaries went into the quarry to kill the troggs one by one. They would not gain any experience points for this as Dun Morogh is a low-level quest area and most of the guards were high-level PCs for whom killing the troggs was too easy. However, protecting the caravan from the troggs would add to the role-play atmosphere and give them social credits within the community of role-players.

During the break, Eiswein continued to hand out missions, such as picking up one of the librarians who was still in Ironforge (a player-character who had logged on late) and assigning another PC to be Speckles' bodyguard. Meanwhile, most players were chatting about previous adventures, while emoting how they roasted marshmallows and drank coffee. As the chatlog in figure 12 below shows, one player did not role-play and grew more impatient as time passed, as could be noticed by his OOC questions both in the say and raid channels.

Ironforge gates

9/17 20:34:16.750 Nightgarde says: ok...and then we go ..ok????

9/17 20:39:43.265 Nightgarde says: can i get in a group?

On the road

9/17 20:40:14.250 Nightgarde says: can i join a group ???

9/17 20:40:41.281 Nightgarde yells: HEHE

9/17 20:47:16.625 Nightgarde says: where are we going?

9/17 20:48:47.750 Nightgarde has joined the raid group

9/17 20:50:16.734 [Raid] Nightgarde: what is there in that town we going to?

At the quarry

9/17 20:55:10.062 [Raid] Nightgarde: ok..what now???

9/17 21:01:30.562 [Raid] Nightgarde: OK::LETS GO

9/17 21:03:05.625 [Raid] Nightgarde: can we go..or what!?!?!?!???

9/17 21:03:12.046 Nightgarde cries.

9/17 21:08:32.593 Nightgarde yells: why do we walk when we can run?

Figure 11: the player-character Nightgarde did not understand what was going on.

Nightgarde can be considered a “griever,” a player who deliberately sets out to harass other player-characters by using or abusing game mechanics (in this case, chat) with the aim of having a negative impact on others, thus causing grief. Occasionally during role-play events, one or a few player-characters barge in and try to ruin the event by talking OOC in the public say channel, yelling, dancing naked, or jumping around. There can be many reasons for doing this: sometimes these are players who do not understand what role-play is and only see a large gathering of player-characters, sometimes these players simply enjoy grieving, and sometimes these are players who have been excluded from the community due to unacceptable behavior and try to get revenge by grieving. Nightgarde did not seem to grief on purpose, however, he just did not understand what was going on: “Why do we walk when we can run?” he asked. As Nightgarde was ignored by other players he was unable to find out that walking is part of role-playing a coherent caravan experience.

To me, the journey became even more atmospheric when it started to snow, one of the weather effects that had been implemented a few months before, in order to make the game world less static. “Two minutes till we leave. Warm yourself, get some coffee in yer bellies. Adjust your armor!” Eiswein yelled over the camp site. As we moved back to the road, Eiswein narrated the atmosphere in raidchat:

9/17 21:02:06.593 [Raid Leader] Eiswein: Something in the air gives the more nervous of you an erie feeling of someone watching the group from the mountains...

The Caravan Gets Attacked

For a moment I considered that this eerie feeling of “someone watching the group” might be the Horde attack that was discussed on the forums. The Horde faction, consisting of orcs, trolls, tauren, and undead is the opponent of the Alliance (human, elves, dwarves, and gnomes). According to the lore, these two parties have fought many wars in years past, but now they have settled into a tenuous peace. The ongoing power struggle between the two factions, who cannot communicate verbally, plays an important part in the game-play of WoW. As *Argent Dawn* is an RP-PvE server, player-characters must fight and kill each other on battlegrounds designed for this purpose. Outside these battlegrounds, players can only attack each other in enemy cities or when they manually switch on their PvP flag, indicating that they are up for a fight. This is called world-pvp and is used by role-players to simulate a battle between two opposing groups.

Role-play battles

In the forum thread in which Eiswein announced the caravan, a Horde player-character named Tardon suggested attacking the group of travelers.

Well, I might be there, depending on how long my raid lasts... its set to last until 20:00, but we usually do some overtime in BWL to get a little further, sometimes up to 22:00 or 23:00 :S BUT, if time permits, I have a question or two: I dont want to ruin anyones event. Now, I'd love to make a little attack on it, but if you would preffere not to, I'll stay away :) (Tardon, Argent Dawn forum)

Players who read the forum (not all players do) knew the caravan could possibly be attacked, and they turned on their PvP flags which would enhance the feeling of danger and possible death. After the caravan had left the quarry, I stayed behind somewhat in order to take snapshots. Even though I had read Tardon's forum post I shivered when the emote /Tardon growls menacingly at you appeared in my chat window. Quickly I moved my camera to see where he could be hiding and as I made Speckles run towards the caravan, I saw that the attack was already happening at full speed.

```
9/17 21:15:27.937 Rezoc yells: WATCH YOUR BACKS!
9/17 21:15:43.140 Eiswein yells: Stop that maniac! Dont let him get to the books!
9/17 21:15:44.640 Amarae yells: AMBUSH!
9/17 21:15:51.281 [Raid] Elaniya: TARDON!
9/17 21:15:56.406 Borislew yells: Form up!!
9/17 21:16:02.796 Nightgarde yells: RESS if you CAN!!
9/17 21:16:03.562 Rezoc yells: Three men Downs!
9/17 21:16:21.546 Eiswein yells: Healers, get these people back on their feet! MErcenaries, spread out! Scout the area for more!
9/17 21:16:24.281 [Raid] Elaniya: ((That,was,cool. :D)
9/17 21:16:51.703 Amarae yells: It seems the undead have taken an interest! Be on guard!
```

Figure 13: Excerpt from chatlog when Tardon attacks the caravan.

As the unedited chatlog shows (see figure 13 above), the fight was a combination between role-play ("Stop that maniac! Dont let him get to the books!"), fighting according to the game mechanics (when someone dies, Nightgarde orders players to "ress" –resurrect – which is the fastest way for a player-character to get back to life again) and OOC remarks ("That, was, cool :D"). After the fight, most of the player-character who died according to the game mechanics did not use the possibility to resurrect, as they consider this to be magic which can only be done by very powerful sorcerers. Also, players will treat those who are dead according to the game mechanics as wounded, because many role-players consider it incoherent for characters to die over and over again. When a character dies, its ghost appears in a graveyard nearby, while the dead body remains where it was. In order to come back to life,

the player-character has to run in ghost form from the graveyard back to the body in order to reunite them. During this attack, several players did this, but waited next to their characters' bodies in ghost form, until they were healed and bandaged by fellow travelers. With a few wounded to carry (player-characters cannot carry each other but will emote this as they walk closely to each other), the caravan slowly and silently moved through South Gate Pass, which leads to Loch Modan. As the Caravan exited the Pass and entered the warmer region of Loch Modan, an unpleasant surprise waited in the Valley of Kings. Two role-play guilds, the Demonologists and the Legitimate Business Club had organized a bandit hold-up. This was also published on the forum but, whereas Tardon had done so OOC, news of the bandit hold-up was published IC:

Kiach looks at the crumpled soggy note he found lying in a puddle outside the Pig & Whistle, looking at the first sentence and trying to decipher what "N.ed m.r.c.n.ries te" .elp Z.b.ns lot H..d u. te' Ar.ent Ar.hi.es car.v.n on S..day 17't. a. 9pm. Al.ta va.ub.es ab.ard app.r.tly. G.th.r te' m.r.c.n.ries in t'L.C te'.e.her an' l.ts f.nd o.t wh. t.is C..av.an 's i. it." could mean... "I'd bes' show this te' t'cap'n..." he says, as he trudges off towards the new watch office as it starts to rain again... (Kiachideon, Argent Dawn forum)

Kiach Ideon is a dwarf who works for the Stormwind City Watch. The character is being performed by a player who was at that time also leading the Legitimate Business Club with his gnome character Duckular. To be part of both a criminal organization and the law force enabled Duckular to trigger events such as this one in which players are encouraged to participate in either the "legitimate business" or fighting the crime. Most players do not know the different characters or alts played by others. This is often kept semi-secret as players want to focus on the role-play, and feel that not knowing who plays the other characters enhances the tension in a plot or event.

"Go Go Go!" one of the bandits yelled, and in no-time the caravan was surrounded by approximately 15 player-characters from the two criminal guilds. "Bandits!" Archivar Eiswein shrieked. "Oh dear...", the Watch messenger mumbled while the bandits started to rummage through the contents of the caravan carts. "No

one moves! No one...gets hurt," a gnome bandit promised. "Halt you dogth!" another threatened. Eiswein tried to gather group of travelers close together and urged everyone not to fight. For a moment the group seemed to be frozen to the ground. Not moving and barely talking. Eiswein handed over some valuables to the menacing priest in front of him. Then he slowly raised his hands in the air. Suddenly the City Watch messenger in the back panicked and everyone started to move. "Anyone that moves... dies!" a bandit yelled, but it was already too late.

The Horde had joined in with the bandits and, before I realized, it Speckles was standing in the middle of a bloody fight. I emoted how surprised Speckles was to see Duckular among those robbing the caravan. Duckular had been the big love of her twin sister Freckles over the last few months. Speckles knew something about his illegitimate activities, but being robbed by Duckular was obviously taking things a step too far. To me as a player, Duckular's presence gave the event more depth, because previous interactions that had shaped Speckles, Freckles, and their relationship, became part of the experience. Duckular's banditry in the Valley of Kings would create a backlash effect in the future: due to his criminal activities – including this hold-up – his relationship with Freckles eventually ended; she could not accept this side of his personality.

In the chaos of the fighting and yelling, Eiswein looked at Speckles and loudly said: "Speckles! Are you getting this?" I nodded and quickly ran to the top of a nearby hill so I could take better snapshots. This time the battle was "dueled" (dueling is a system in which players from the same faction can invite each other to a fight), partly PvP and partly a so-called emote fight, in which players use emotes to either enhance or replace the game mechanical fight. While everyone was busy fighting, the Archivar tried to get the caravan carts moved out of the valley; "Caravan! Move out! Get those wagons moving! Help with the wagons! Push them! Let's get to safer grounds!"

Permanent death

As part of the caravan moved to the final destination of Thelsamar, the battle continued. Halfway through the battle, the following OOC message appeared in raidchat:

```
9/17 21:39:03.406 [Raid] Evangeline: ((This time, the young huntress was too wounded for Elune's grace to save her, and her body would lay on the road to Thelsamar for good))
```

Evangeline, a night-elf hunter who had traveled with the caravan as a scout had been wounded during the first Horde attack and now she had been “killed” again, and the player decided it was time for her character to die. Permanent death is not part of the game-play, which means that a player-character can come back to life endlessly. In role-play, however, some players find this incoherent and choose to let their character permanently die at a certain point. Sometimes this is unplanned, as was the case here, sometimes players script the death of their character because they do not want to continue playing the character or because they are quitting the game (as Fingelsbrew did).

```
9/17 21:39:25.437 [Raid Leader] Eiswein: ((Evangeline, that is so sad... sobs..
9/17 21:39:32.171 [Raid] Bergoth: (( Your not ressing her?! ))
9/17 21:39:51.281 [Raid] Spiffie: (( Pah. We didn't get any fancy schmancy ressing. ))
9/17 21:40:46.109 [Raid] Bergoth: (( Wot she isnt going to res?!
9/17 21:41:42.421 [Raid] Fimbleshanks: OOC: What are the rules about ressing? If we die, are we dead for the rest of the event or what?
9/17 21:42:00.156 [Raid] Bergoth: (( Sho Eva is never coming back? :/ ))
9/17 21:49:49.953 [Raid] Bergoth: OOC: What happend to Eva?
```

Figure 14: Player-characters discuss the permanent death of Evangeline.

These fragments of the chatlog show how Eiswein commented OOC-ly on the sadness of the situation but accepted her choice, whereas Bergoth continued to ask why Evangeline was not going to bring her character back to life. Months before, Jørgen himself had caused a forum discussion on “perma-death” after permanently killing his City Watch character Eldal when he became annoyed by his own over-visibility and the continued attacks on the police force which he experienced as grieving instead of role-play:

I was soo tired of the bombings and the assassinations. But even worse was the constant peckering of the watch. We were supposed to be a dysfunctional comical gang of watchmen, but people treated us like we were either the Judge Dreads of Stormwind (ignored our laws since it was not according to “lore” etc.) or as we were the most effective task force in Azeroth. [...] The Watch was the most sought after guild at the time, and we had people scheduled for meetings and recruitment every day. When I entered the office and these two bandits jumped Eldal and threatened him not to interfere with the caravan that left Stormwind the

next day.. something just died in me. [...] I realised what had happened. Eldal was stopping people from interacting with the rest of the Watch. Everyone hated Nath, and they mainly ignored the others because of Eldals rank. And at the same time I felt so disgusted about the constant attacks on watchmen, so when Ilsen started cutting Eldal into pieces (he was un-armed and unable to defend himself) I let it go. Time to show that actions had consequences. And they did. Ilsen and Xarch had to use 2 months to redeem themselves both IC and OOC. (Jørgen, e-mail interview on the forum discussion, April 2006)

The discussion that took place after the event highlighted the ways in which role-play interaction is about negotiation between player-characters who have different ideas about what constitutes role-play. The attackers were accused of using “power-emotes” in which a player-character enforces a certain type of behavior on the other player, for example, “murderer stabs Eldal with his sword.” To most players, this is unacceptable behavior as it leaves out the negotiation phase. One player simply decides what happens. An acceptable emote would have been: “murderer tries to stab Eldal with his sword.” This would have left Eldal the option to decide what his response would be. In this case Eldal decided to let his character die from the stab wounds. In doing so he hoped to offer the attackers the experience of role-playing a murder with actual in-game effects. The attackers however, never expected Eldal would play along and let his character die. In the forum discussion that ensued, Ilsen and Xarch were accused of killing an important character; at the other end of the spectrum, Eldal was accused of power-emoting his death upon his murderers. There are still no detailed rules in the community about permanent death, and Fimbleshanks’ questions reflect this: “what are the rules about ressing? If we die, are we dead for the rest of the event or what?” Evangeline’s death did not cause a similar discussion as in Eldal’s case. However, both she and her murderer Tardon did use the forum to explain the events. Evangeline wrote:

I know I didn't reply in raid, but IC and all that etc :-) It was fitting that the young huntress' body remain where she fell. It fit the scenario. [...] Eiswein, I thought about ressing a second time, but you know... it just fit better to stay dead. It felt more IC for her, for her purpose scouting for the Archive Caravan. it worked and I felt good about it :-) (Evangeline, Argent Dawn forum)

As soon as I had read Evangeline’s message in raidchat, I quickly moved back into the valley to find her and take a few snapshots of her dead body as it lay stretched out over road. I emoted how Speckles kneeled and focused the zoom lens on her peaceful-looking face. Speckles’ bodyguard, Rachidi Hamud, stayed close, because in the background the battle was still in full progress. Meanwhile, Eiswein narrated in raidchat how the caravan pressed on, moving towards Thelsamar. “The sounds of battle can be heard behind them as the mercenaries.. well.. whatever is happening back there.. The Softer elements of the Caravan is reaching Thelsamar, pushing the wagons in front of them. Finally the books and the Argent Archives are safe.”



Figure 15: "This time, the young huntress was too wounded for Elune's grace to save her, and her body would lay on the road to Thelsamar for good" (Evangeline, raidchat) I quickly moved back into the valley to find Evangeline and take a few snapshots of her dead body as it lay stretched out over road. I emoted how Speckles knelt and focused the zoom lens on her peaceful-looking face.

Arrival in Thelsamar

After taking a few last snapshots of the fight, I felt a rush of excitement as Rachidi and I ran towards Thelsamar, which is located at the edge of the huge lake from which the region Loch Modan takes its name. In front of the village tavern, Eiswein was thanking the different guilds and individual mercenaries while he paid them in-game money in return for their escort. Soon more and more travelers arrived and, as they emoted how they looked tired from the journey, the Archivar urged them to enter the tavern for a well-deserved beer. The fights however, had slowly moved up the road and suddenly both the Horde and the bandits had the village under attack. In a chaotic last battle, one of the bandits was captured and group attackers decided to retreat. Eiswein kept a close eye on the happenings and as soon as the Horde and bandits moved out he reported this through the raidchannel in order to create both IC and OOC closure of the event. Whereas his first sentence in the next excerpt is IC, the second and third sentences are recognizable as OOC; they are no longer descriptive but focused on communicating action. Everyone was urged to move to the tavern for a group photo and afterwards Eiswein invited players to have a look at the photo reel that he would start to make right after the event.

9/17 22:34:05.421 [Raid Leader] Eiswein: A drum can be heard from far away. The Horde seems to have given up. The Archives should be safe for now.

9/17 22:34:36.406 [Raid Leader] Eiswein: Anyone that wishes should hurry back to the Inn and line up at the front for a special snapphoto by Freckles. Look your finest. :)

9/17 22:38:01.796 [Raid Leader] Eiswein: The Archives are safe. See <http://argentarchives.net> for a photoreel of the caravan and make sure to visit in the future as we will reveal more of what our plans are for AD. Thanks for participating.. Now: Drink. be merry.

The aftermath

Eiswein's closure of the event did not mean that players stopped role-playing. Outside the tavern, the Archivar continued to thank and pay player-characters while inside the tavern the wounded were taken care of by a priestess. Others sat down for a drink and narrated to each other the events of the evening. Meanwhile, in one of the rooms of the inn, the captured bandit was being questioned. He turned out to be the night-elf Trias Tempestrunner, the brother of Elaniya, one of the members of the Argent Archives. "I needed money," Trias, who was a former lawyer weakly defended himself. Together the PCs used the events during the caravan as a trigger to perform a much longer-running interaction between their characters. A few weeks later, Trias was imprisoned and a poster on a city center notice board (a message posted on the official forum) called for an execution without a trial. Apparently the bandit hold-up was only one small crime in his repertoire of unruly deeds.

Crime and fighting crime are important role-playing themes on the *Argent Dawn* server and in line with this player-characters have set up law firms and a number of trials have been organized in the Dwarven Halls of Stormwind. The event in which Trias would be executed displayed some of the difficulties of player-character gatherings. Taking up the role of gamemaster, Trias carefully planned the Sunday evening event, for which a large group of player-characters showed up. However, unlike the caravan, where everyone is a participant with a different mission, the setup of a trial requires a very visible performance of a small group of player-characters (the organizers: the lawyers, those on trial, the guard, etc.) while a large group of player-characters performs the role of onlooker. This differentiation often leads to tensions: most players dislike what they call "scripted" events, in which a gamemaster has already predetermined the outcome, and organizers of trials want to have feedback from the audience in order to create an improvised happening. This clashes with the fact that an audience's role mostly involves being quiet; otherwise, if everyone actively performs their role as audience by talking and emoting, then the actions of the organizers get lost in the cacophony. Disappointed by the chaotic execution event (during which he was saved from death), Trias commented that the role of onlooker can be participatory in a fruitful way, not by a visible performance during the trial, but simply by being there (thus creating the atmosphere of a trial) and using the event both as an opportunity for internal character reflection and as input for role-play beforehand and afterwards:

You don't attend something without being changed, emotionally, in whatever way. Even at a party you end up coming out of that experience with one more memory, good or bad. Maybe if your character's experience at the party was to be gawked at cause she couldn't dance, well then maybe she's not as eager to attend another party or maybe goes out for dance lessons to learn how to better dance, determined to prove those who laughed at her wrong. Every rp that happens provides a way to enrich other rp. Sometimes it's the most interesting when it enriches it indirectly. (Trias, Argent Dawn forum, 4 December 2006)

Compared to the often-chaotic and abrupt endings of trials, the caravan ended slowly, with Thelsamar settling back into its peaceful quietness as player-characters either logged out or continued their travels. While I lingered on to take some photos of the characters who stayed behind, Eiswein whispered to me "Well, that was enough for a day.. yaiks.." "Did you get any good pics?" I told him I hoped so, and he decided to log on as his Horde character, so he could thank Tardon for the attack. It was 11:30 pm when I finally said my goodbyes and logged off. Feeling exhausted, I stumbled to the kitchen to get something to drink before I sorted out the screenshots I had taken during the evening.

When I got back to my desk, I opened the folder in which the screenshots were saved. I had made few hundred screenshots of our three-and-a-half-hour journey. There had been approximately 30 participants, not counting the 15 or so bandits and the small group of Horde PCs. While chatting over MSN and Skype with Zoe and a few non-WoW-playing friends who were still awake, I created a folder where I could save the screenshots that I liked. Next I opened the screenshots and, using a program called IrfanView, sorted them one by one. I judged the screenshots based on content (did I

have a snapshot of every player?), framing, and lighting. I also included screenshots that were only partially useful; I knew Jørgen would cut these apart to make the photo reel. A total of approximately 100 screenshots was the end result. "All done," I told Jørgen over MSN. "God, that was an exhausting event!" he replied. I agreed. While I loaded my zipfile with screenshots, we talked about the event and Jørgen commented on how hard it was to gamemaster an event for almost 50 player-characters of which he was not only the organizer but also performing one of the most visible characters:

I wanna get this photoreel up as quickly as possible. Though the shots this time was horrible. Waaay to much time managing all the newbie roleplayers. [...] I realised the enormous scope of keeping everyone in line when we were halfway. I dont want to script it too much either. But with a lot of people comes a lot of talking. It is hard to keep track of.. well.. anything. And its hard to organize anything since everyone seems keen on talking to.. well.. Eiswein. :P (Jørgen, MSN conversation)

It was past 01.00 when I turned my computer off to get some sleep; the next day I had to get up early for work. In the morning I woke up with a bang when the alarm bell of my mobile phone rang. My shoulder and right arm ached from the position I'd been sitting in so long while behind my computer: my legs pulled up underneath myself, and hunched slightly forward while continuously moving my mouse and using my keyboard to make Speckles move, talk, and take snapshots. In my dreams I had walked with the caravan again. I was tired and vowed again to read or watch something else after playing WoW next time. In the afternoon I had a look on the official forum and several guild forums to find out how other players had experienced the event.

Evangeline: "It was lots of fun. That fellow on the horse, the really brusque one Brusiah, I think it was? Ordering everyone to keep up with the caravan, leave the dead where they were, absolutely priceless. Whomever it was, it was possible to see him chivving slaggards along, making them run to get back to the safety of the main caravan. The scouts out in front... once the environment changed to a feeling of being watched from the mountains, well, we ran with it. It was great. There was just enough time between that and the actual first attack for us to relax! (Evangeline, Argent Dawn forum 17 September 2006)

Duckular: "OOC: Was a very enjoyable (if short) RP holding up the caravan, even if Duck was very confused at the time after recieving a nasty blow to the head about thirty minutes earlier at the market from an Undead Rogue, but still managed to stand there masked and with a gun in his hand... Oh, and shoot someone during the getaway of course..." (Duckular, Argent Dawn forum 17 September 2006)

Albie: "Nice event, if a bit hectic at times. As usual, the best fun was just hanging around chatting with friends after the event :)" (Albie, Gnomish Rescue Squad forum, 18 September 2006)

Winzy: "That was awesome! Those guys are really serious! I am looking forward to the continuation of this. In my opinion this is probably one of the best ideas I have seen performed in WOW, especially if they manage to get this into enemy lands without getting a complete chaos. I will join as far as possible, at least until it gets chaotic. I hope the rest of the Squad also will, the more we are the merrier!" (Winzy, Gnomish Rescue Squad forum, 18 September 2006)

Two days later, Jørgen posted the photo reel on the website of the Argent Archives. In a combination of edited screenshots and text, he narrated and commented on the journey mainly from the IC perspective of Eiswein. Partly the photo reel looks as if the character Eiswein has made it, at the same time, however, the reel is humoristic as it plays on the edge between being IC by making use of comic-like exclamations such as "Swoosh, Krakow, Kersplach," and OOC screenshot comments on, for instance, a human male carrying an enormous sword: "Compensating for something?". (figure 9, page 98)

In the fall of 2006, Jørgen organized five caravans, one every two weeks. Additionally, he created specific assignments and missions that took place in and around the town or village where the caravan would stay during the two weeks in between. The event sheets he created for this (posted on the Argent Archives website, see figure 16) encouraged guild members to conduct interviews in the area and to advertise the existence of the Argent Archives. Furthermore, he invited player-characters to do predesigned quests in the surroundings that he embedded in the storyline of the Argent Archives. Most characters in the Argent Archives are player's alts, which means that while most player-characters participate in the caravan they are seldom online in between, except when Eiswein would log on. For each character players can create a friends list, which shows when players are on- or offline. When the Argent Archives members would see Eiswein log on, they often switched to their the Argent Archives character and only then would they be involved in either interviewing or questing. The IC interviews, which included questions regarding age, relatives, occupations, likes, and dislikes, resulted in simple character profiles, and Jørgen made character portraits for many of these.

During the last event, in which the caravan traveled from Refuge Pointe in the Arathi Highlands to the seaside village of Southshore, there was another Horde attack which ended in an enormous PvP fight. This battle caused a sharp discussion on the official server forum between three groups: 1) Alliance players who traveled with the caravan, 2) Horde players who used PvP in order to role-play an attack on the caravan, and 3) Horde players who simply attacked the caravan. The Alliance players felt that the event had been ruined by the Horde PCs who, according to them, did not attack the caravan for role-play reasons but to grief the travelers by "ganking" or "corpse camping." Ganking means to

Loch Modan

17. SEPT. - 1. OCT.

AS A START TO THE JOURNEY THE ARGENT ARCHIVES WILL SPEND A TWO WEEKS PERIOD AT THE STOUTLAGER INN IN THELSAMAR. THIS MEANS THAT THE GUILDMEMBERS TRANSPORT THE ARCHIVE TO THE NEW LOCATION DURING THE CARAVAN ON SUNDAY. YOU ARE ENCOURAGED TO CONDUCT ALL INTERVIEWS IN THIS AREA, PLUS SPEND AS MUCH TIME HERE AS POSSIBLE TO SHOW PEOPLE OUR PRESENCE HERE. THERE IS NOTHING THAT STOPS YOU FROM TAKING A CRYPHON ELSEWHERE HOWEVER, BUT EISWEIN WILL STAY AT THE STOUTLAGER AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE. IF YOU WANT TO CATCH HIM FOR A MISSION ITS A GOOD IDEA TO HAVE YOUR HEARTHSTONE TO THELSAMAR.

LOCATION GOAL:

INTERVIEW 20 ALLIANCE MEMBERS

ASSIGNMENTS WHILE IN LOCH MODAN:

- USE THE GENERAL CHANNEL TO TELL OF OUR STUFF. THESE ARE THE OFFICIAL ONES. (PLEASE: NO MORE THAN EVERY TEN MINUTES! WE ARE NOT SPAMMERS!)

// THE ARGENT ARCHIVES ARE LOOKING FOR GUILDS TO INVITE TO THEIR EVENTS. CONTACT GUILDMASTER EISWEIN AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AND TELL HIM OF YOUR GUILD SO THAT WE CAN INVITE YOU AND RECORD YOUR GUILD INFORMATION AT [HTTP://ARGENTARCHIVES.NET](http://argentarchives.net)

// THE SCRIBES OF THE ARGENT ARCHIVES ARE LOOKING FOR EXCITING MEMBERS OF THE ALLIANCE TO INTERVIEW. SEE A SCRIBE TODAY AND ARRANGE YOUR PERSONAL INTERVIEW AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

- TELL PEOPLE OF THE NEXT CARAVAN AND THAT WE NEED BOTH MERCHANTS AND GUARDS. MAYBE THEY WILL DECIDE TO JOIN IN ON OCT. 1ST!

OPTIONAL MISSIONS: (PLEASE SEE OOC REQS BELOW)

1. I WANT TO EXPLORE THE NORTHERN PDINS IN LOCH MODAN. THERE ARE, HOWEVER, A LOT OF RUMORS THAT OGRES HAVE SETTLED DOWN AT THIS LOCATION. IF ANYONE WISHES TO ESCORT ME, SEE ME AT THE INN.

2. I HAVE A TOP SECRET MISSION THAT WILL REQUIRE AT LEAST TWO GUARDS AND TWO SCRIBES. NONMEMBERS CANNOT COME. THIS IS TO IMPORTANT TO BE KNOWN BY OUTSIDERS.

3. I'VE HEARD A VERY INTERESTING RUMOR OF A LOST SCROLL IN THESE PARTS. IF ANYONE COULD FIND A PERSON THAT KNOWS THE AREA WELL THAT WOULD BE GREAT. SEE ME AND I'LL GIVE YOU DIRECTIONS FOR WHERE TO LOOK FOR IT.

Figure 16: the Argent Archives event sheet for Loch Modan (Jørgen Støvne 2006).

HERE IS A SHORT LIST OF WHO'S WHO IN THE ARCHIVES AT THE MOMENT:

SCRIBE ELYOORA
SPOKESPERSON AND EISWEIN'S RIGHT HAND

LOREMASTER TEEDOT
RESPONSIBLE FOR LENGTHIER INTERVIEWS AND TALES

SCRIBES:
CRUDELLA
RELI
DOBBLEY

MESSENGERS:
AIREICYL
ELANDYA
FLARN

GUARDS:
RACHIDI (RESPONSIBLE FOR SECURING THE MERCHANDISE)
DOOTSE: (TOME-KEEPER; RESPONSIBLE FOR SECURING THE ARCHIVES)

NEXT WEEK:

THE RUMORS WITHIN THE GUILD SPEARS OF GOING FURTHER NORTH. SOME SAY MENETHIL, OTHERS SAYS THE REDGEE POINT. EITHER WAY THE NEXT LOCATION WILL HOPEFULLY FEATURE THE FOLLOWING HAPPENINGS:
TRAVELLING MARKET
HEIGHTENED HOSTILITIES
FIRST GUILD INTERVIEW

Send all background stories etc to:
contact@argentarchives.net

1. OOC Req: 2 hours available. Minimum 2 party members must approach Eiswein. 1 Messenger/Guard must be present in the party.

2. OOC Req: 1 hour available. Minimum 4 members must be present. No outsiders!

3. OOC Req: 1-2 hours available. 1 Guildmember and 1 Non-guildmember must be present.

hurt someone's feelings, but in MMORPGs it is used to describe an "unfair" PvP kill during which an attacker kills a player and then waits around the victim's corpse until its ghost returns to resurrect, and then the attacker kills the player again. These three comments on the event illustrate the tensions between the different types of instrumental and role-play taking place on the same server:

Nhars (Horde attacker, 3): "First of all id like to say it was the most fun ive had in weeks, thank you. Second atleast i am in no way trying to bring back world pvp i do it for my own personal enjoyment, i love world pvp. World pvp is ganking, corpse camping and blueboying like it or not. (Argent Dawn forum, 22 October 2006)

Albie (participant in the caravan, 1): "The problem is not world pvp as such. Feel free to run a blitz through the caravan killing everything in sight - we keep pvp on to enable this being a possibility. Heck, that would even be nice, if we were allowed to pick up the pieces, tend to the wounded and RP our losses." (Argent Dawn forum, 22 October 2006)

Zimbad (Horde attacker, 2) who I recently had a conversation with the "spiritual leader" of Free Cookies. And his mind appears rather odd. Apparently, PvP is all about annoying other players and they enjoy it when people whine about them because it shows that their job is done, because they annoyed people enough to make them whine. All I can say is: Sad, sad person. (Argent Dawn forum, 22 October 2006)

Because the Horde managed to steal a few carts from the caravan, the Argent Archives was forced to stay in the village of Southshore for a while. Simultaneously, Jørgen stopped organizing the caravan, as he told me that his daily life became too demanding. The silence of the Argent Archives started to worry players, and on the forum one of the regular travelers considered the impact of the PvP fight during the last caravan:

the Argent Archives Caravan is by far the best RP-event I have been part of in my two years in WOW, it would be very sad to see it fall apart because of some lunatics harrassing us. We should not let them win! If there are anyone left of the initiators of this project, let us get it going again. I can not promise anything but my participation, but I have reason to hope that there will be more protectors to follow you if you continue. (Trumper, Argent Dawn forum)

Jørgen responded that this was not the case and that he would organize new events once he had the time. At the time of writing he picked up on the project again, which consists of the in-game the Argent Archives guild and a web portal "where players can present their characters, guilds and role-play experiences (stories, screens, art work etc.) and at the same time check current news, read stories and see others work" (Støvne 2007, 2). His motivation is not only to encourage role-play and the creation of a role-play community, he also uses the project to practice his advertising and graphic design skills.

“I had always assumed that the ‘RP’ in MMORPG was ironic,” stated psychologist Nick Yee in his recent survey on role-playing across MMORPGs, including World of Warcraft (WoW). “After all, most MMORPGs have had to deliberately set aside designated role-playing servers, and these have always been in the minority. This suggested that role-playing wasn’t something most players wanted to do in an MMORPG. At the same time it was clear that a role-playing subculture existed that operated with its own rules and etiquette” (Yee 2006).

Yee’s irony over the role-play aspect of MMORPGs is not surprising. As I have discussed in chapter 1, role-play is a contested style of play in both computer-mediated and analogue role-playing games. At the same time, the detailed description of the Argent Archives caravan in this chapter illustrates that the WoW RP-PvE server Argent Dawn indeed harbors a role-playing (sub)culture that operates with its own rules and etiquette.

The role-play culture is a very heterogeneous one; not only is the relationship between instrumental play and role-play highly disputed, the different role-play styles, rules, and etiquette are also under constant negotiation. Furthermore, role-play is not only a matter of online, in-game, and in-character behavior. The role-play experience is negotiated across the constructed boundaries of real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline.

3 Beyond the Magic Circle

“We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness,” opened play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith in his 1997 book on the ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith 1997, 1). According to Sutton-Smith, this silliness is the result of the ambiguity of play.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, role-play in *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is indeed characterized by ambiguity, as it is not only a matter of online, in-game, and in-character behavior. The role-play experience is negotiated across the constructed boundaries of real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline. Sutton-Smith argued that not only play itself has many paradoxical qualities, the research on games and play is very diverse as well. After distinguishing seven “rhetorics of play,”²⁷ and discussing how each rhetoric addresses a specific ludic form and has its own ideological and disciplinary underpinnings, Sutton-Smith states that what binds these scholars together is a concern about the ambiguity of play. In order to illustrate this, he quotes a number of experts, such as Mihail Spariosu, the classical scholar who called play “amphibolous,” which means that it goes in two directions at once and is not clear (1969). He goes on further to name anthropologist Victor Turner, who described play as “liminal” or “liminoid” meaning that it occupies a threshold between reality and unreality (1969), and Gregory Bateson, also an anthropologist, who suggested that play is a paradox as it both is and is not what it appears to be (1955). Sutton-Smith himself concludes that variability is the key to play, as play is characterized by “quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility” (Sutton-Smith 1997, 229). Instead of focusing on play forms and their normative rules, he urges game researchers and play theorists to give detailed study to the variations in play.

My research into online Fantasy role-play can be understood as one such deep exploration of the variability in play as Sutton-Smith proposed. However, silliness is lurking just around the corner, as

²⁷ The seven rhetorics of play that Sutton-Smith distinguishes between are the rhetorics of progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, self, and frivolity (Sutton-Smith 1997).

within the new field of digital game studies, there is still a struggle going on to deal with the ambiguity of play. Discussing the “betweenness” of play, T.L. Taylor noted in her ethnography of the online role-playing game *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) that there is a prevalent idea of (re)constituting the boundaries between real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline (Taylor 2006, 151). The icon of this notion is the concept of the “magic circle,” which is used to bracket off the game experience. However, this is not the only boundary that should tame ambiguity: the “ivory tower” is another strong metaphor within the field of digital game and play research.

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical understanding of the ambiguity of role-play. I will show the implications of bracketing off the game experience and academic game research by the use of the metaphors of the magic circle and the ivory tower. In order to deal productively with ambiguity, I claim that we need to understand games and play from a network perspective.

The Magic Circle and the Ivory Tower

Game designers and researchers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman adopted the term “magic circle” as one of the core concepts they use to define the game experience in their excellent book on game design fundamentals, *Rules of Play* (2004).

To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins. [...] The term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins [...] Within the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 95-96)

Salen and Zimmerman borrowed the term “magic circle” from the Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, who argued in *Homo Ludens* (1938) that play “proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (Huizinga 1938, ed. 1955, 13). Referring to this quality of play, he compared the playground to similar arenas such as “[...] the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain” (Huizinga 1938, ed. 1955, 10). The artificiality of games, captured in an appealing way by Salen and Zimmerman with the (re)introduction of the term magic circle, led to a perception of games as safe havens of imagination and experimentation that are separated from “real” or “ordinary” life. The game space is understood as a “special space,” a “fun space,” because players enter into it voluntarily and are temporarily freed of work. This concept of game-play has led to the question of whether in-game behavior can be transferred beyond the boundaries of the game and vice versa. De-

pending on the type of game and the type of behavior, the magic circle is considered to be either closed (in the case of unwanted behavior such as violence) or highly permeable (in the case of desirable goals such as education).

The magic circle that supposedly surrounds the game experience is not the only form of boundary construction that can be found in game research. In the context of organizing the first conference of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) in 2003, I discussed how creating a new autonomous discipline such as game studies mainly involves constructing boundaries on different levels:

[...] doing game studies, creating a new discipline, means constructing boundaries on content, researcher and institutional level and therefore participating in a process of inclusion and exclusion, of constructing the other ("othering") in order to construct oneself. (Copier 2003, 405)

This process of inclusion and exclusion revolves around which games, forms of play, and players should be studied, how they should be studied, by whom, and why. One of the boundary constructions I discussed was between game researchers, designers, and players, which continued to be an important issue over the last few years.

Following up on Espen Aarseth's advice to understand games through the ethnographic method of "self-play" (Aarseth 2003), researchers often flaunt their player's identity, while at the same time asserting their authority as a researcher. Game researchers make use of the work of designers and players who are theorizing games, while simultaneously defining them as "others" theorize from an applied design perspective, instead of for an academic perspective. Between 2003 and 2005, game researchers presented their work in the "Ivory Tower" column that is published at the International Game Developers' Association website: "Rather than an iconic barrier, this "Ivory Tower" will serve as a bridge among game developers and academic game researchers. The aim is to focus on fundamental game research issues, tying them to concrete examples and game development questions."²⁸ And, while during the 2006-2007 *Game Developers' Conference* game researchers presented "The Game Studies Download: Top 10 Research Findings," according to John Hopson, most commercial game designers are still not listening to what academic game researchers have to say (Hopson 2006). Academic game researchers are simultaneously opening and closing the boundaries of the ivory tower. At the same time, game designers and players are "othering" academics as "theory snobs."

Another boundary that game scholars continually (re)constitute is one between digital games and "analogue" games and forms of play. Although it has been claimed that digital games should be understood in the context of analogue play and research (Aarseth 2003, Frasca 1999 and 2003, Juul 2000), the new field of game studies mainly focuses on research into digital games. As a result, cross-medial research that includes both digital and analogue play is still in its infancy. On role-play speci-

28 http://www.igda.org/columns/ivorytower/ivory_archive.php

cally, game researcher Frans Mäyrä noted, for instance, that “The media-independent research into tabletop RPG and larp in its multiple important forms is still lagging behind in the academic world” (Mäyrä 2004, ix). At the same time, computer-mediated role-playing games are a favorite object of study across a wide variety of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, and economics. In chapter 1, I have shown how helpful cross-medial research into Fantasy role-playing games is in understanding the contested relationship between instrumental play and role-play in WoW. I argued that it is crucial to have a cross-medial understanding of role-play in order to come to terms with the MMORPG role-play processes and experiences.

Furthermore, most researchers of computer-mediated role-playing games (MUDs and MMORPGs) focus on the instrumental play that the PvE and PvP modes offer: doing quests, fighting monsters, chatting, trading, gaining experience, learning skills, and advancing levels or fighting other players (Castronova 2006, Taylor 2006). Only a few scholars discuss role-play, often focusing on role-play as a form of interactive storytelling (Aarseth 1997, Klastrup 2003, Mortensen 2003, Murray 1997, Schaap 2001, Yee 2006) or identity play (Bruckman 1992, Turkle 1997). However, as of late, some RPG researchers are studying role-play as a cross-medial phenomenon, tying their work into the knowledge networks on PnP RPGs and LARP both inside and outside academia (Montola 2005, 2006 and 2007, Tychsen et al. 2005 and 2006, Vallius et al. 2006). These are examples of boundary actors who link across boundaries.

In what follows, I offer a reassembling of the ways in which game researchers as well as designers and players have theorized both analogue and digital Fantasy role-play. In order to provide an understanding of the ways in which role-play in Fantasy role-playing games has been theorized, I used the network perspective of Actor Network Theory (ANT).

From this perspective, one can see that the knowledge network on Fantasy role-playing games is comprised of a collection of smaller networks, tiny clusters in which each human or nonhuman actor is connected to all other nodes within the cluster by strong ties (for example collaborations). Weak ties (for example, a meeting during a conference) connect the members of these clusters to other clusters who have strong ties in their own circles (Grannovetter 1973). These clusters revolve, for example, around academic disciplines, research or design associations, companies, certain games, or ways of play. I distinguished between two large knowledge clusters that are continually bracketed off from and encapsulate many other knowledge networks: “inside academia” and “outside academia.” “Inside academia” is understood as research and theorization that is disseminated within an academic context. The main goal of this work is descriptive and analytical academic theorization, while the secondary goal can be design oriented. “Outside academia” means that the theorist can still be an academic, however, the work is being disseminated through non-academic channels, such as design publications, forums, and weblogs. The main goal is applied theorization, the means to enhance the design and play of role-playing. The theory of boundary work and the concept of a boundary actor is used to examine critically when, how, and to what end the boundaries between the different knowledge networks as well as around the magic circle of play are drawn and defended (Gieryn 1983, 1999, and 2002).

First I present research into PnP RPGs and LARP as it has been done “inside academia.” These studies deal with the ambiguity of role-play by framing the experience in different frames or spheres. Next, I discuss the concept of the magic circle in relation to the framing of the role-play experience.

Framing the Role-Play Experience

Sociologist Gary Alan Fine is a pioneer when it comes to theorizing the cultural dynamics of role-play (*Shared Fantasy*, 1983). Living in Minneapolis, the area where D&D was conceived, Fine learned about Fantasy role-playing games through an informal conversation with a colleague in 1977.

Because he knew that I was interested in the sociology of culture, he mentioned that his son was an active war gamer, and had recently been talking about a new type of gaming, similar to war games, which he called role-play gaming. He mentioned that recently an article had been published in the Minneapolis Tribune about these games (Kern 1977). I had some interest in war games in high school, and I obtained a copy of the article. Although the article was specific, it did describe the local gaming club and indicated the location of its meetings. I decided that I would attend one Friday evening. (Fine 1983, 243-244)

Between 1977 and 1978, Fine role-played in the Minneapolis-based Golden Brigade Club and later in two private gaming groups, both as a player and as a gamemaster. We have to understand Fine’s work

in the context of the early years of PnP RPGs, when a multitude of D&D clones were being published. *The games that Fine played were Traveler (1977), Chivalry & Sorcery (1977), and Empire of the Petal Throne (1975).* Compared to D&D, these games had more detailed world descriptions and focused social simulation (which includes both instrumental play and role-play) instead of dungeon crawling. From a social interactionist perspective, Fine analyzed PnP RPGs as a contemporary "urban leisure subculture" (Fine and Kleinman 1979). He understood Fantasy game culture as a "shared fantasy," a (micro)cultural system or "idioculture" (Fine 1979), and explored the processes by which players generated meanings and identities through engrossment and identification with their characters. Fine argued that Fantasy role-playing games illustrated the dynamics of cultural creation, which may be similar among many different groups in society.

Performance researcher Daniel Mackay defined PnP RPGs in 2001 as an "imaginary entertainment environment" (Mackay 2001). He set out to consider role-play as a performance art, contextualizing the activity in its reciprocal relationship to popular culture. Like Fine, Mackay built on his experience as both role-player and gamemaster, and his book was the result of a "longtime desire to write about the art of role-playing games" (Mackay 2001, xi). One of the games that Mackay played and analyzed was *Everway (1995)*, a dice-less role-playing game with an emphasis on role-play. According to Mackay, the RPG functions as a framework that facilitates the performance of both the gamemaster and the players. Therefore his main focus was on the aesthetics of the role-play performance. He considered the ontology of the role-played performance and the kind of subject that role-playing games texts and processes construct. Mackay considered Fantasy role-playing games to be examples of the means by which recreational communities (subcultures) are formed.

Not only is the relation between the real and imaginary in the role-play experience an important subject to the work of Fine and Mackay, it's also important to the handful of other academic work on PnP RPGs and LARP. In order to understand the construction of the different layers of the role-play experience, Fine made use of Erving Goffman's "frame analysis," while Mackay referred to Richard Schechner's theories on "performance spheres" (Goffman 1974, Schechner 1988).

In *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life (1959)*, sociologist Goffman took Shakespeare's famous line "all the world's a stage" to heart and formulated social interaction in terms of drama. Using theater as a metaphor, Goffman argued that we are all actors playing a variety of roles. We adjust these roles continually in order to create a coherent social interaction in a specific setting. In his 1974 book, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Goffman expanded on his ideas of social interaction by adding the concept of "framing," which focused on how individuals make sense of "any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of an ongoing activity" (Goffman 1974, 10). These "strips of activity" (simply the moment of social interaction that the researcher decides to study) can have various interpretations, depending on the frame that is used. Goffman described frames as cognitive structures or interpretation schemes that guide perception and representation of activities. Frame analysis builds on the concept of "primary frameworks" which are the elemental interpretative frames

through which we make sense of the world. The frameworks can be transformed by “keys” or “fabrications.” A game is, for instance, a keyed frame because all participants are aware that an activity that already has meaning in the primary framework has a different meaning in the keyed frame. In the case of a fabrication, the individual is unaware that this keying has occurred (for instance, being part of a game without knowing it) (Greg 2006). Frame analysis was widely discussed during the time in which Fine was writing his analysis of Fantasy role-playing games.

Fine argued that games are particularly appropriate for the application of frame analysis as they represent a keyed frame consisting of a bounded set of social conventions that induce engrossment. Goffman’s 1961 essay, “*Fun in games*,” with its concern for the boundaries of play and experience, can be understood as the precursor to frame analysis. Building on Goffman, Fine distinguished between the primary framework (conventions of daily life), the game framework (conventions of the game), and the character framework (conventions of the character).

Primary Framework	The common sense understandings that people have of the real world.
Game Framework	Referring to the conventions of the game.
Character Framework	In which the players are not manipulating their characters (game framework) but in which they are their characters: “The character identity is separate from the player identity.”

Table 1: Frames of meaning in Fantasy role-playing games (Fine 1983, 186).

Mackay’s taxonomy of the role-playing game is based on work by the pioneer of performance studies, Richard Schechner. He aimed to situate role-playing games in a context that included other performances, both theatrical and anthropological. The categories that Mackay borrowed from Schechner and applied to role-playing performance are: drama, script, theater, and performance, all of which are part of the larger performance domain Schechner called “ritual.” According to Mackay, the category of drama is the role-playing game rulebook, while the script is both the game system as well as the fantasy world as it is defined by both the rulebooks and the participants. In turn, the drama and the script inform the categories of theater and performance, which consist of the actual role-play performance. Furthermore, Mackay expands Fine’s categorization into five frames of meaning: the primary or social framework inhabited by the person, the game framework inhabited by the player, the narrative frame which is inhabited by players narrating their characters’ actions in third person, the constative frame, in which the gamemaster describes the setting of the game both in first and second person, and, finally, the performative frame in which the players act out their character in first person.

Primary frame	Inhabited by the person. Referring to the common sense understanding that people have of the real world.
Game frame	Inhabited by the player. Referring to the conventions of the game.
Narrative frame	Inhabited by the raconteur. Players narrating their character's actions in third person.
Constative frame	Inhabited by the addresser. Gamemaster describes settings and situations to the players in-character (NPCs) and in the second person.
Performative frame	Inhabited by the character. Players doing first-person in-character talk.

Table 2: Frames of meaning in Fantasy role-playing games (Mackay 2001, 56).

Next to the work of Fine and Mackay, only a handful of articles on PnP role-play can be found in academic publications. A recent ethnographic study on the ways in which role-players negotiate symbolic boundaries has been conducted by Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust (Waskul and Lust 2004, Waskul 2006). Referring to the work of Fine, Mackay, Goffman, and Huizinga, Waskul and Lust set out to analyze how players negotiate between the categories of persona (the Fantasy character), player (the one who plays the Fantasy character), and person (other roles that a player takes up in daily life such as student, researcher, etc.). These categories match with Fine's character framework (character), game framework (player), and primary framework (person).

Compared to the academic research on PnP role-playing games, scientific publications on live action role-play (LARP) are even rarer. However, it is remarkable how much work has been done in Northern Europe. Much of this work has been conducted by students and has been written in non-English-language publications. One of the few academic works on LARP in English is Geir Tore Brenne's Master's thesis, *Making and Maintaining Frames. A Study of Meta Communication in laiv Play* (2005). Brenne theorized Norwegian LARP or *laiv*, as it is called in Norway. He used Goffman's frame analysis in order to understand how *laiv* players make and maintain the framing of their play situation. He distinguished between the same three frames as Fine, plus a level of subframes within the character frame. Brenne argued how the process of defining a situation in *laiv* can be understood as a demonstration of social constructionism, in which social reality as a whole is perceived as "constructed" (Berger and Luckman 1966).

Level	Frame	Role
micro	Subframes within the playframe	Character's role as brother, mother, enemy, lover etc to other characters within play
meso-1	Playframe in a play	Character
meso-2	Laiv key, the subculture of laiv	Laiv player
macro	Oslo city culture	Young adult

Table 3: The levels, frames and roles of *laiv* play (Brenne 2005, 34).

Beyond the Magic Circle of Role-Play

Even though the term magic circle might seem to be especially fitting for research into Fantasy role-playing games, I have argued, along with others, that the concept is very problematic (Castronova 2006, Copier 2005, Lammes 2006, Nieuwdorp 2005, Taylor 2006, Pargman and Jakobsson 2006). The problem is twofold. Conceptually, the magic circle refers to a preexisting artificiality of the game space, which creates a dichotomy between the real and the imaginary that hides the complexity of actual games and play. The metaphor makes the boundary between "game" and "non-game" even stronger because it represents the game space as an isolated magical wonderland which seems to be almost impossible to grasp rationally.

In their book *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman open the chapter in which they present the magic circle with a picture of a chalk circle drawn on the pavement. In this chapter they discuss the "artificial" quality of games, which is one of the key concepts in their definition of games:

*A game is a system in which players engage in **artificial** conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 80, emphasis by me)*

In discussing this further Salen and Zimmerman define artificial as: "Games maintain a boundary from the so-called "real life" in both time and space. Although games obviously occur within the real world, artificiality is one of their defining features." (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 80) In order to express this important feature of games, they borrowed Huizinga's term magic circle and assert that two important features of concept are that it is closed and magical:

As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. [...] The term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins. (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, 95)

Salen and Zimmerman instilled the artificiality of games and play with no less than three strong metaphors: the magic circle, the chalk circle, and the clock. While Huizinga referred to the magic circle as an example of a playground, Salen and Zimmerman interpret circle as "magical" in terms of giving a feeling of enchantment. The chalk circle, which reminds one of children's games, visualizes the idea that the magic circle is literally bracketed off from the "real world." Their description of game time in terms of a clock that is both limited and limitless makes the image of a magical wonderland complete. This representation of the magic circle is problematic because it creates a strong dichotomy of "inside" versus "outside." The metaphors generate the idea of an innocent imaginary space that exists within its own boundaries of space and time, seemingly untouched by social reality, work, and power.

In order to discuss the relation between fantasy and reality, scholars have opted for a counter-rhetoric that includes breaking or blurring the boundaries between the inside and outside of a game. Markus Montola, for instance, defined pervasive games, that is games that use the physical world and multiple media as a platform (such as *I Love Bees*, 42 Entertainment 2004) as games that deliberately expand the social, spatial, and temporal boundaries of the magic circle (Montola 2005). MMORPG researchers have argued that the magic circle of MMORPGs becomes porous when we consider, for example, the sale of virtual items and gold on eBay (Castronova 2006, Taylor 2006). Counter to the image that they created with their metaphor of the magic circle, Salen and Zimmerman themselves have also argued that the boundary between playing and not playing is often fuzzy and permeable.

Beyond the metaphor of the magic circle

In order to understand this paradox of the magic circle, in which games can both be open and closed, we have to engage more critically with Huizinga's *Homo ludens* and Salen and Zimmerman's work.

Huizinga wrote his definition of play in relation to his overarching argument that culture is *sub specie ludi*: civilization arises and unfolds in and as play. He set out not only to better understand the play element in culture, but mainly to understand the play element of culture; how culture itself is formed through the process of play.²⁹ Therefore he argued that "Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration." At the same time, Huizinga wrote, it is an important part of daily life: "[...] play presents itself to us in the first instance: as an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives. As a regularly recurring relaxation, however, it becomes the accompaniment, the compliment, in fact an integral part of life in general" (Huizinga 1938, ed. 1955, 9). He assumed that game-play generates experiences and memories that influence not only future play but also help to shape all other aspects of culture.

Building on Huizinga's idea that games are "temporary worlds within the ordinary world," Salen and Zimmerman argued that games can be open or closed systems depending on the perspective that we choose. They distinguished between three primary perspectives: rules (formal perspective), play (experiential perspective), and culture (cultural perspective). Salen and Zimmerman claimed that the formal systems of games are closed, whereas if we consider games as play, the magic circle can be either open or closed and considered as culture; games are extremely open systems.

29 Most of the misinterpretation of *Homo Ludens* might be due to the fact that, against Huizinga's will, the English subtitle of his book became "A Study of the Play Element in Culture" instead of "of Culture," thus hiding the nature of his overarching argument.

rules	The essential logical and mathematical structures of a game.	Games considered as rules are closed systems. Considering games as formal systems means considering them as systems of rules prior to the actual involvement of players.
play	The players participation with the game and with other players.	Considered as play games can be either closed systems or open systems. Framed as the experience of play, it is possible to restrict our focus and look at just those play behaviors that are intrinsic to the game, ignoring all others. At the same time, players bring a great deal in from the outside world: their expectations, their likes and dislikes, social relationships, and so on.
culture	Larger cultural contexts in which games are designed and played.	Considered as culture, games are extremely open systems. In this case, the internal functioning of the game is not emphasized ; instead, as a cultural system the focus is on the way the games exchanges meaning with culture at large.

Table 4: Games as rules, play and culture (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 6, 96-97).

Salen and Zimmerman argued that the study of game phenomena that cross the borders of the magic circle (such as computer-mediated and analogue role-playing games, player-generated mods and hacks, level editors and tools designed for players, games created as open-source systems, games that are played within and across multiple platforms, and self-organizing social networks) are essential for the future of innovative game development. However, even after discussing a few of these examples, Salen and Zimmerman still maintain their use of the magic circle, stating that: "[...] although the magic circle blurred, shifted, and blended in with its environment, it still in some way remained intact" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 28). In trying to find a way around the "magic" and the "strong boundaries" of the metaphor of the magic circle in order to express how they can both be open and closed, a few game researchers reformulated the magic circle. In discussing pervasive games, Eva Nieuwdorp (2005) chose to adapt Goffman's metaphor of the "screen" which he presented in the aforementioned essay, "Fun in games": "[...] the screen not only selects but also transforms what is passed through it" (Goffman 1961, 33). In his economical analysis of MMORPGs, Edward Castronova opted for the term "porous membrane": "[...] people are crossing it all the time in both directions, carrying their behavioral assumptions and attitudes with them. As a result, the valuation of things in cyberspace becomes enmeshed in the valuation of things outside cyberspace" (Castronova 2006, 150). In her ethnography of *Everquest* (EQ), T.L. Taylor defined MMORPG play as "play between worlds": "Playing EQ is about playing between worlds – playing back, and forth, across the boundaries of the game and the game world, and the "real" or nonliteral game space" (Taylor 2006, 17).

Building on these modifications of the magic circle, Daniel Pargman and Peter Jakobsson proposed a "weak-boundary hypothesis" (Pargman and Jakobsson 2006). In order to adopt a more flexible idea of the boundaries of play, they (re)introduced Goffman's concept of "frames" and Fine's idea of "frames-within-frames," which suggests that, inside the primary framework (which is the basis for everything we do), we establish roles and subframes that redefine the situation. Pargman and Jakobsson argued that gaming creates a specific set of roles or subframes. Thus, they replaced the magic circle with the porous or weak boundaries of the game framework, which holds the conventions of the game. In line with the work of Goffman and Fine they state that "There is nothing magical about switching between roles. It is something we do all the time and can literally be done at the blink of an eye" (Pargman and Jakobsson 2006).

Beyond the concept of the magic circle

Even though the magic circle between the real and the imaginary can be blurred, shifted, and blended, Salen and Zimmerman argued that it will always be there. A way of circumventing the magic circle is leaving the idea that game-play happens separately from ordinary life out of the definition. Not only Salen and Zimmerman but also game researcher Jesper Juul formulated a definition of games based on an analysis of previous conceptions of games and play (Juul 2003 and 2005). If we look at the definitions they use, we can distinguish two positions with regard to the play experience. On the one hand, there are researchers and designers who set games and play apart from the ordinary experience, while on the other hand, others maintain that continuity exists between play and daily life. While Salen and Zimmerman chose to include the separation between games and ordinary life in terms of artificially and the magic circle, Juul left this aspect out of his "classical game model" as the boundaries between play and nonplay are "fuzzy and under constant negotiation" (Juul 2003, 34). As a result, Juul presents the following definition of a game:

A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable. (Juul 2003, 35)

He considers PnP RPGs to be borderline cases of games as their rules are not fixed. Leaving the concept of artificiality a step away from the magic circle, however, it does not necessarily encourage an understanding of the ambiguity of game-play. I believe that the primary problem is not artificiality, but the fact that Salen and Zimmerman use the magic circle to define artificiality as a boundary in time and space that separates games from ordinary life. Instead, they could have used the literal meaning of artificiality which refers to something that is "humanly contrived, often of a human model," or something which is "caused or produced by a human and especially social or political agency" (Merriam-Webster). This way of defining artificiality brings the game model of Salen and Zimmerman sud-

denly very close to the conventions of the game, as they can be described by a keyed game framework (Goffman 1974, Fine 1983, Pargman and Jakobsson 2006). From this perspective, artificiality is not a preexisting quality, but a schemata of interpretation that is negotiated and (re)constructed in relation to primary frameworks. Agreements on time and space are but two of the variabilities in this framework, which, as Fine, Mackay, Waskul and Lust, and Brenne have shown, can also consist of a variety of other keyed frames.

In the article "Connecting Worlds" (2005), in which I pointed out the problems with both the concept and the metaphor the magic circle, I suggested shifting our focus from a study of games in culture to a study of game-play as one of the play elements and producers of culture. Thus, I aimed to break away both from defining "what is" and "what is not" a game and from separating digital and analogue role-play. Instead, I set out to understand the activity of role-play as it takes place within the context of a variety of role-playing games and the heterogeneous Fantasy game culture. A crucial aspect of this approach is of course the fact that role-playing games are multi-player games that not only revolve around the relation between the player and the game, but between players and the game as well. A shift from games to the behavior of players in relation to others and the game is also what differentiates the work of Fine, Mackay, Waskul and Lust, and Brenne from most recent scholarship on digital games. They understand game-play from a sociocultural perspective: social interactionist (Fine, Waskul and Lust), performative (Mackay), and social constructivist (Brenne). By building on the work of Goffman and Fine, Pargman and Jakobsson's "weak-boundary hypothesis" also focuses on play instead of games, which separates their alternative from, for instance, the "porous membrane" (Castronova). A focus on play as social interaction within a specific context opens up possibilities to discuss the ambiguity and variability of game-play, for instance with regard to the relation between real and the imaginary, not in terms of a "closed" and "magical" circle, but as constructs, that are, like Juul mentioned, under constant negotiation. Rules are also one part of these constructs that can be negotiated and (re)constructed. An approach to understanding these constructs is Goffman's concept of "frames" and Schechner's "spheres." In using these concepts, Fine, Mackay, Waskul and Lust, and Brenne all concluded that the role-play experience is shaped by (re)constructions and negotiations between various real and imaginary frames, between what I called the "code and culture" of the game in chapter 1.

Fine took Goffman's argument further by specifying two components of frame analysis: 1) the relationship among identities generated in the primary-, game-, and character frameworks, and 2) the stability of frames. Conceiving of players as collections of selves, he argued that these identities are simultaneously activated; the frames are porous and players are constantly shifting between them. Furthermore, he stated that even though engrossment takes place, players are very aware of the relationships between frames, as part of the game is a conscious playing with the different awareness contexts (Fine 1983, 181-204). Building on the work of Schechner, Mackay stated that because frames are porous we should not think of these levels of experience as frames, but as "spheres" that come together in a network:

If one needs a metaphor to localize and (temporarily) stabilize playing, "frame" is the wrong one – it's too stiff, too impermeable, too "on/off", "inside/ outside." "Net" is better: a porous, flexible gatherer; a three-dimensional, dynamic flow-through container. (Schechner 1993, 41, as cited by Mackay 2001, 63)

He argued that the player-character can be articulated within each of the spheres and that behavior in all the penetrating layers together creates the performance (Mackay 2001, 64). In a similar fashion, Waskul and Lust concluded that during play the conceptual boundaries between the layers implode, "[...] as person, player, and persona blend and blur into an experience that necessarily involves all three" (Waskul and Lust 2004, 351). Brenne, who studied the role of meta-communication in making and maintaining the play situation, argued that this involves both general conventions and particular knowledge of and habits in a situation that are learned and rehearsed in advance, and the active use of techniques to shape and maintain the situation when acting during play (Brenne 2005, 127-131).

To recapitulate, the concept of the magic circle refers to a preexisting artificiality of the game space that, combined with the strong metaphor, creates a dichotomy between the real and the imaginary which hides the ambiguity, variability, and complexity of actual games and play. Building on the above analysis of framing in role-playing games, I posit that even rules alone do not create a preexisting artificiality. Games need to be played, and players actively influence each other as well as what the system of the game becomes. Thus the game-play experience is always the result of the interplay between different cognitive frameworks on rules, play, and culture.

The network perspective

In this thesis I propose to go beyond the magic circle by using a network perspective in order to understand this interplay between game rules, play, and culture, which is, according to Salen and Zimmerman, crucial for innovative game research and design. They already made the first step towards a network perspective by defining games as systems: "a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 55). However, as I have shown, the magic circle prevents their model of games and play from being used for a deeper understanding of the ambiguity and variability that are essential to play.

Recently there have been more scholars who set out to understand games or role-playing games from a network perspective. However, I understand games to be more than "magic nodes" in the networks of society, as game researcher Sybille Lammes proposed in her critique on the magic circle (Lammes 2006),³⁰ rather, I perceive games as complex networks in themselves (in a similar way as Salazar 2005, Bruun et al. 2007).³¹ This allows me to understand how online role-playing games as networks of human and nonhuman actors are simultaneously tied in with other networks of production, power, and experience. Together, these networks make up what Manuel Castells called the network society (Castells 2000).

Besides an understanding of how the rules, play, and culture are intertwined, the network perspective also allows us to go beyond the concept of the ivory tower. The ivory tower refers to a preexisting status of academia, which, combined with the strong metaphor of a space that is disconnected from daily reality, creates a dichotomy between "inside" and "outside" academia that hides the complexity of the actual relationship between researchers, designers, and players. It hides, for example, how game researchers and their work are always part of the networks they study. The different roles and frames of players, designers, and researchers are deeply intertwined while at the same time being negotiated and contested. However, from these interrelations, innovative research, design, and play can grow. This is crucial if we consider the fact that governments are now funding game research in which different academic and design disciplines are brought together for the context-driven purpose of boosting both the local entertainment game industry and the development of game applications for education and

³⁰ I find it problematic that Lammes continued to use the concept of "magical": "I find this an apt term to both capture the intensity of playing a game as well as the (fictitious) enchantment that games can bring about" (Lammes 2006, 13). Holding on to this metaphor renders invisible the ways in which "intensity" and "enchantment" are paradoxical and negotiated experiences.

³¹ Javier Salazar considered virtual worlds and MMORPGs as complex systems (Salazar 2005) and The Danish Larp Network Group, consisting of a group of natural sciences students, uses the theory of complex networks to evaluate and design LARP scenarios. They consider the nodes to be players, characters, or roles and the ties the relations between them. "Who knows who in real life, who is supposed to know who before the game starts, and how does this translate to the whole game? How does the network of the larp evolve during a game?" (Bruun et al. 2007, 116).

training. Knowledge and innovation cannot be found in one node or hub but in the interrelations of the network as a whole.

Understanding role-play from a network perspective

From the network perspective, role-play is especially interesting. As I have shown in chapter 1, role-play is a contested and negotiated style of play, which makes it useful to uncover the rules, play, and culture that are constructed through online role-playing games. Additionally, because role-players consciously engage in the process of constructing and negotiating roles and frames, it becomes very visible how, through MMORPG play, preexisting roles and frames are negotiated and (re)constructed, while at the same time new roles and frames are being constructed. These roles and frames can simultaneously be related to what we consider to be real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline.

For various situations we construct different roles and cognitive frames, however, these identities and frames exist simultaneously, they are porous and never fixed. These roles and frames can never be fixed because they are continually being negotiated and (re)constructed, as both Huizinga and Goffman suggested, often through play-like processes. Games are merely one of the settings in which these processes take place. From this, it follows that my goal is not a mapping of frames. Frame analysis after Goffman has been heavily criticized for being too much focused on bracketing off frames while it is difficult to empirically identify the different, unconsciously constructed, and quickly shifting frames (Gamson 1975, Benford, 1997). This is precisely why Schechner redefined frames into spheres, so he could describe the flexibility of the process. Instead of discussing the properties of frames or spheres, my focus is on the process of (re)constructing and negotiating cognitive frames.

In chapter 1 I already presented a cross-medial working definition to describe the power process that shapes up the process of playing a role-playing game. I believe that this is the process that binds together the three important “invisible rules” that role-play theorist Markus Montola defined as the foundation for role-play interaction. These rules establish that a role-playing game needs a process of defining an imaginary world (world rule) and it needs a power structure (power rule) with several player-characters (character rule) who are controlling this process (Montola 2007, 94). Conflict and negotiation are the aspects that set these foundations of the role-play interaction in motion.

In a role-playing game-player-characters engage in conflict and (re)construct and negotiate networks of individual and shared cognitive frames by means of formal and informal rules.

In role-playing games player-characters thus (re)construct networks of individual and shared cognitive frames that relate not only to game and character frameworks, but also to primary frameworks. The type of conflict depends on the goal and the style of conflict negotiation (style of play). In role-play, the primary goal is the construction of a coherent shared fantasy (shared cognitive frame) through enacting the character and dramatic conflict (in chapter 4 I distinguish between improvised and story-driven dramatic conflict). As I have shown in the previous two chapters, role-play in WoW is always negotiated against instrumental play, in which the primary goal is progression of the character through instrumental conflict with the game and/or other players. Below I give a further explanation of the aspects that make up my working definition of the role-play process.

1 Network: A network is an enduring pattern of interaction among heterogeneous human and nonhuman actors who define one another (identity). They coordinate themselves on the basis of common protocols, values, and goals (process). A network reacts nondeterministically to self-selected external influences, thus not simply representing the environment but actively creating it (interdependence). Key properties of a network emerge from these processes and unfold over time, rather than being determined by any of its elements (emergence). The network of the game is tied in to the other networks of which society is made up (based on Stalder 2006, 180).

2 Player-characters: A player-character is one of the actors in the network of the game. Player-characters negotiate conflict with each other. The player can use the character as a pawn or enact the character's role, or anything in between. Players rapidly switch between these stances depending on the goal and style of play (based on Edwards 2004).

3 Conflict: Conflict is a contest of powers. Conflict between player-characters can take many forms, from cooperation to competition, from solo instrumental conflict with a game system to multiplayer dramatic conflict. Conflict can both be generated by the game and by players (based on Salen and Zimmerman 2004, Edwards 2004).

4 Negotiation: Player-characters negotiate conflict with one another and the game. Thus player-characters continually participate in a process of constructing and re-constructing individual and shared cognitive frames. Goals and play styles consist of different negotiation processes.

5 Formal and informal rules: The means by which players negotiate during play, including formal rules embedded in the code of the game, guidelines, and informal rules as defined by designers and players. Examples of informal rules are: the fictional setting, character creation, resolution of imaginary events, reward procedures, and even social conventions such as "ar-

iving on time.” Formal and informal rules are not fixed but can be understood as cognitive frames that are continually negotiated (based on Kim 1997, Edwards 2004).

6 Cognitive frames: Individual and shared cognitive frames are definitions of a situation which are continually (re)constructed and negotiated in accordance with principles of formal and informal rules which govern conflict and the subjective involvement of player-characters in them. Cognitive frames can relate to the real or the imaginary or both. Frames exist within frames; they can exist simultaneously and are porous (based on Goffman 1974).

These definitions are based both on the work of academics as well as on the work of role-players, designers, and researchers of PnP RPGs and LARPs “outside” academia. In what follows I present these knowledge networks and their contents, as they consist of a thirty-year-old tradition of mixing play, design, and research. This tradition can be the basis for further developing a network perspective for computer-mediated role-playing games.

Play, Design, and Research

The RPG theorization that takes place “outside academia” is applied theorization; it is meant to enhance play and design. As I have shown in chapter 1, practically oriented discussion on Fantasy role-playing started directly after the publication of *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974. Wargaming magazines, as well as fanzines and newsletters dedicated to PnP RPGs, became a place for designers, gamemasters, and players to reflect on their play experiences. The same happened with the emergence of LARP in the early 1980s. Designers, gamemasters, and players alike started to analyze their play experience in order to improve it. Today, this theorization mainly takes place online on forums, blogs, and wikis, while LARP theorization also takes place during the *Knutepunkt* conferences and its published proceedings. While the theorization of PnP RPGs and LARP seems to be an “underground” world inhabited by independent designers and avant-garde players, the theorization of computer-mediated RPGs, especially MMORPGs, is part of this commercial industry itself.

There are many books on the design of computer-mediated role-playing games available (for example: Alexander 2003 and 2005, Mulligan and Patrovsky 2003). These books focus on either programming or on previous design experiences. Their target audience is the MMORPG designer. An interesting exception to this is Richard Bartle’s *Designing Virtual Worlds* (2003), which not only addressed designers but researchers and players as well: “This is a book for people who design virtual worlds. Because of this, it’s also a book for people who implement, operate, study or play virtual worlds” (Bartle 2003, xix). Bartle gives an historical overview of virtual worlds and discusses the general design principles of these worlds with an emphasis on the experience of players. Based on a

long-lasting debate between MUD players on what they want to get out of their MUD experience, Bartle created a taxonomy of player types that consists of achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers.

achievers	players give themselves game-related goals, and vigorously set out to achieve them
explorers	players try to find out as much as they can about the virtual world
socialisers	players use the game's communicative facilities, and apply the role-playing that these engender
killers	players use the tools provided by the game to cause distress/ help to other players

Table 5: Richard Bartle's taxonomy of player types (1990, 1996 and 2003).

Whereas achievers and explorers act and interact with the virtual world, socializers and killers prefer acting and interacting with each other (Bartle 2003, 130-148). Bartle's taxonomy became widely used by designers, players, and researchers alike, making his work into a boundary actor. However, Bartle was not the first to construct such a categorization of players and play styles. The players and designers who theorized PnP RPGs and LARP also made similar categorizations before him.

Theorizing PnP RPGs

Early role-play theorists focused on defining what is and what is not a role-playing game (mainly to differ the activity from its precursor wargaming) and categorizing role-players (Mason 2003). Chaosium's *Different Worlds* magazine (1979-1987), for example, presented a professional forum for discussion of role-playing games. In the article "Aspects of Adventure Gaming" (1980), gamemaster Glenn Blacow was one of the first to introduce a taxonomy of ways to play RPGs, which we can consider to be the precursor to future categorizations of play styles such as the *Threefold Model* (Kim 1997) and the *GNS Model* (Edwards 2001).

power gaming	the main drive of the players is gaining power in levels and special abilities
role-playing	the most important element is the player character and his or her life
wargaming	everything evolves around the tactical abilities of the players and the gamemaster
storytelling	the tale is most important, the player characters act within the limits of the tale

Table 6: Glenn Blacow's taxonomy of RPG play styles (1980).

Blacow stated that every game contained the aspects of power gaming, role-playing, wargaming, and storytelling to a rudimentary degree, but often one aspect overruled the others.³² The goal of his analysis was practical; the idea was that, by identifying player preferences, misunderstandings between players could be avoided. However, in many cases players developed these categories further in order

32 After Blacow's article, three related articles were published in *Different Worlds* that developed the concept further: *The Fourfold Way of FRP* (Johnson 1981), *Personalities of Role-Playing Gamers* (Pulsipher 1981), and *Profiles from the Four-Fold Way* (Costikyan 1984).

to privilege their own approach. This underlines that we have to understand theorization as a process of framing that is done by researchers, designers, and players alike. Framing both generates knowledge and is also a tool to build like-minded communities.

During the 1990s, discussion on role-playing moved from magazines and newsletters with limited print-runs and distribution to the Internet. The result was that theorists from all over the world could easily participate in the same discussions, which in turn created an enormous growth in the theorization of role-play. Discussions started in newsgroups such as the rec.games.frp.advocacy and continued in web-based forums such as The Forge. The analysis and taxonomy of game and player styles, along with the description of play experiences continued to be of major interest.

The Threefold Model. The rec.games.frp.advocacy Usenet newsgroup was started in 1992 by role-players, many with an academic background, in order to discuss comparisons between different role-playing games and styles. Role-player John Kim, who wrote the “frequently asked questions” (FAQ) section for the newsgroup and now maintains a website on RPG theory, stated that the original intent of the newsgroup was for it to be a place for “flame wars” (heated debates) between advocates of the different games and styles of play:

However, in the process of hashing out differences, a set of contributors began to actually discuss core concepts of role-playing: what it is, how it works, what styles and techniques exist, how to do it better. I believe that the key development of the group was an acknowledgment that there are different valid styles of role-playing. Different role-playing games are not merely different methods to achieve the same goals, but actually different goals in themselves. (Kim 2007)

The theory that grew out of the heated debates of the newsgroup was the *Threefold Model* (Kim 1997), which distinguished between three paradigms of play, each of which have different goals: dramatist, gamist, and simulationist. The basis of the model was the ways in which decisions are made in a PnP group. The newsgroup coined the concept “group contract” to refer to the formal and informal agreements among players. These agreements include not only the formal rules of the game and the expected style of play but social conventions as well, such as “call in advance if you know you’ll be late.” The proposition is that systems and players often have more than one goal and thus mix the different techniques of social decision making (Kim 1997).

dramatist	is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline.
gamist	is the style which values setting up a fair challenge for the players
simulationist	is the style which values resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations, without allowing any meta-game concerns to affect the decision.

Table 7: The Threefold Model (Kim 1997).

The GNS Model. The *Threefold Model* was the inspiration for GNS Model (2001) and later *The Big Model* (2004) articulated by Ron Edwards. In 2001, independent game designers Edwards and Clinton R. Nixon created The Forge website and forums, a community for independent developers of PnP RPGs. Between 2001 and 2005, Edwards moderated two Forge forums, titled GNS Model Discussion and RPG Theory, dedicated to the theorization of role-playing games. Here, the Forge community created their own role-play theory in the context of the creation and review of “indie games.” Based on the Threefold Model and these discussions, Edwards characterized playing a role-playing game as a social activity that revolves around the social interactions and creative priorities of the participants. This social context can be defined as “social contract”: “All interactions and relationships among the role-playing group, including emotional connections, logistic arrangements, and expectations” (Edwards 2004).

The essence of role-play is negotiating which situations or events can be part of the “shared imagined space” (SiS) that is collectively constructed according to both informal and formal agreements. According to Edwards, the SiS contains five components: character, setting, situation, system, and color.

Character	A fictional person or entity which may perform actions in the imaginary situation.
Setting	Elements described about a fictitious game world including period, locations, cultures, historical events, and characters, usually at a large scale relative to the presence of the player-characters.
Situation	Dynamic interaction between specific characters and small-scale setting elements; Situations are divided into scenes. Considered to be the “central node” linking Character and Setting, and which changes according to System.
System	The means by which imaginary events are established during play, including character creation, resolution of imaginary events, reward procedures, and more.
Color	Imagined details about any or all of System, Character, Setting, or Situation, added in such a way that does not change aspects of action or resolution in the imagined scene.

Table 8: The five components that shape the shared imagined space (SiS)(Edwards 2004).

The ways in which players negotiate the SiS differ greatly depending on their priorities. Edwards argued that the best chance for a gaming group to be fun on a sustained basis is when both the system’s “techniques” (GM tasks, character creation, resolution of conflict, reward system) and the “ephemera” (the moment-to-moment or sentence-to-sentence actions and statements during play such as in-character and out-of-character dialogue, referring to texts, sound effects, taking or referring to notes, kibitzing, laughing, praise, or disapproval) are coherent with a certain play paradigm or “shared creative agenda”. His GNS model distinguishes between the three creative agendas of gamism, narrativism, and simulationism.

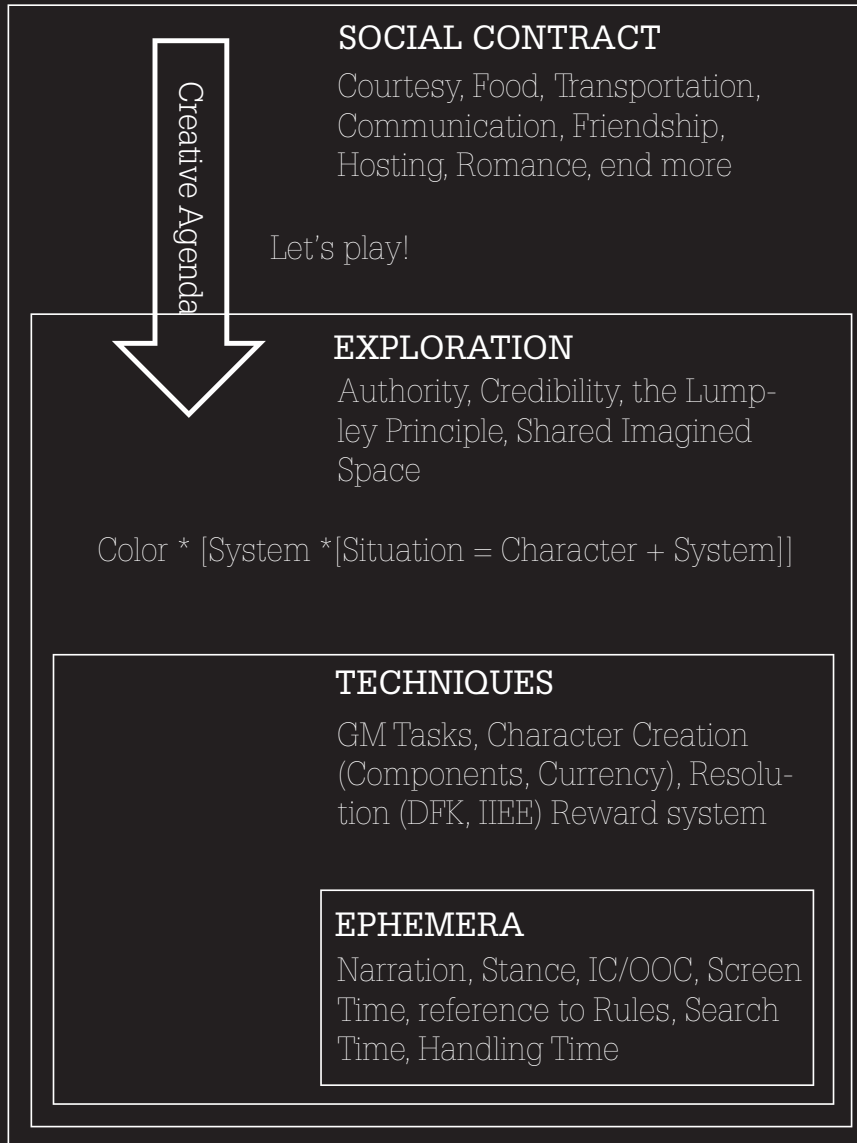


Figure 1: The Big Model. Contents within each box are considered to be expressions or specialized versions of the outer boxes which contain them (Edwards 2004).

Gamist	The players accept the challenges of the Shared Imagined Space, taking risks and showing performance (as players) and reaching or missing a certain goal. Sometimes all players may work together to a goal, sometimes they may compete.	Gamist players like to overcome obstacles, gain power or increased options, and 'win'.
Narrativist	The players engage in the moral and human issues of the Shared Imagined Space, taking a position (as players) and thereby making a statement about their characters/the game world/themselves.	Narrativists like to shape their role-playing sessions to create a good story or examine a dramatic theme.
Simulationist	The players experience the Shared Imagined Space as something worthwhile for its own sake, something which they do not fully control because it follows its own laws. Experiencing the Shared Imagined Space and contributing to it is part of any role-playing, but in this mode, it's the top priority.	Simulationists want their character's behavior and circumstances to follow a believable, consist, or 'realistic' logic.

Table 9: The three creative agendas, explanation based on Edwards (2001, 2004), Tarcikowski (2007), and Varney (2006).

Edwards also distinguished between three cognitive positions or "stances" a player can take towards his or her character. He argued that players can shift stances frequently, but specific stances are often used for certain creative agendas.

Actor	The person playing a character determines the character's decisions and actions using only knowledge and perceptions that the character would have. This stance does not necessarily include identifying with the character and feeling what he or she "feels," nor does it require in-character dialog.
Author	The person playing a character determines the character's decisions and actions based on the person's priorities, independently of the character's knowledge and perceptions. Author Stance may or may not include a retroactive "motivation" of the character to perform the actions. When it lacks this feature, it is called Pawn Stance.
Director	The person playing a character determines aspects of the environment relative to the character in some fashion, entirely separately from the character's knowledge or ability to influence events. Therefore the player has not only determined the character's actions, but the context, timing, and spatial circumstances of those actions, or even features of the world separate from the characters. Director Stance is often confused with narration of an in-game event, but the two concepts are not necessarily related.

Table 10: The three cognitive positions or "stances" a player can take towards his or her character (Edwards 2004).

Countless revisions, as well as new models and categorizations, have been formulated over the last ten years. Although each model gets more detailed, Bartle's MUD players' styles (1990), Blacow's taxonomy (1980), the *Threefold Model* (Kim 1997), and *The Big Model* (Edwards 2001 and 2004) show many similarities that I used to formulate my network perspective on Fantasy role-play. To recapitulate: playing a role-playing game is embedded in social interactions. The game revolves around negotiation in which events and situations can be part of the shared fantasy. This is done by both informal and formal rules, both related to the game and to daily life. There are different types of games and ways to play, ranging from highly instrumental to role-play. It is debated whether one game should cater to different styles or if a group of players can have different styles.

Actual play and design. In 2005 Edwards closed the Forge theory forums. He did so not because he felt there was no longer a need for theorization; instead, he argued, theorization should happen in the context of actual play experiences. Shortly before the closure of the Forge forums, academic role-play researcher Markus Montola argued that he regretted the fact that "Forge theory" was almost inaccessible to an outsider due to the fact that the knowledge is hidden in long discussion threads, with no references, written in sophisticated insider's lingo. To him, the solution was publication of the theorization from the Forge forums, to try to tie the knowledge network of The Forge in with an academic discourse. The differences between "inside academia" and "outside academia" are constructed around the following issues: 1) the language and terminology of the discourse, 2) dissemination of the discourse, and 3) the purpose and goal of the discourse.

Many Forge forum members have an academic background and refer to academic knowledge networks in their discussions. This means that the community developed its own, sophisticated discourse over time. The effect is that many new visitors to the forums feel overwhelmed by the theory and terminology and ask for clarification of terms and a history of the discussions. However, in reply to Montola, the Forge members argued that almost no one (except Edwards) felt the need or responsibility to write theoretical overviews. Timothy Kleinert explained how this was connected to the design-oriented goal of The Forge:

[...] the purpose of the Forge isn't to discuss & develop theory---it's to promote independent publishing. The theory is a by-product. As a community, we have no academic aspirations, publishing is our focus. We don't care if people learn the theory because theory isn't necessary for writing or playing games. It helps, but isn't necessary.³²

In practice, the closure of the theory forums meant that Edwards moved the theoretical discussion to another forum named Actual Play, in which designers, gamemasters, and players discuss what goes on in their actual role-play sessions and what they learn from those experiences. The more abstract theoretical discussions moved to "forge diaspora" such as personal websites and (shared) weblogs.

Theorizing LARP

Most "outside academia" theorization on LARP is being done in the context of the Knutepunkt conferences that have been organized since 1997, each year in a different Northern European capital. *Knutepunkt* literally means "the point of a knot," a nodal point or meeting place: "Knutepunkts are very diverse events, shifting between the atmosphere of an academic conference to the mood of a crazy surrealist larp. Networking, partying, lectures, discussions and entertainment have always been core components of *Knutepunkt*" (Fatland 2005, 12). Not only in name, but also content-wise, the Knutepunkt conferences and the proceedings published from them are a hub of different knowledge networks. The participants of the *Knutepunkt* conferences often have an academic or artistic background (or both). Some contributors work at universities, sometimes within a related field (Fatland 2005, 18). Authors often refer to academic knowledge, thus placing their work in an academic context

both in content and in language. Additionally, the way in which the books from the conference are published – as proceedings – refers to academic forms of knowledge dissemination. Over the course of the last five *Knutepunkt* publications (2003-2007),³³ a major transformation occurred: the focus shifted from a group of role-players theorizing about LARP in order to be taken seriously in 2003 to a group of role-players actively building bridges between different knowledge networks in 2005 and then, in 2007, to a group of role-players that knows it consists of a blend of researchers, artists, and game designers who are aiming to inspire, in a serious manner, “without being boring.”

Bridge building. The proceedings *As Larp Grows Up* (Gade, Thorup, and Sander 2003) is firmly grounded in a knowledge network of LARP players and designers. This volume of proceedings covers “the modern classics of *Knutepunkt*” including: “The Three Way Model” (a revision of the Threefold Model), “The Dogma 99 Manifesto” (aimed at the development of LARP as an art form and a medium in itself), and “The Manifesto of the Turku School” (aimed at character immersion and society simulation). Furthermore, the book contains descriptions and analysis of LARP processes and interactions, hands-on methods to create betterLARPs, and a dictionary of Nordic LARP terminology. The purpose and goal of the discourse is applied theorization: “The aim is to help the *Knutepunkt* newbie up to date – as well as spawn creativity, innovation and ideas. There is nothing as practical as a good theory” (Gade, Thorup, and Sander 2003, 6).

In the next proceedings, *Beyond Role and Play* (Montola and Stenros 2004), analytical or descriptive theory takes up a more important part, but this is still done alongside the applied theorization. In the introduction, Frans Mäyrä placed the proceedings in the context of digital game studies. The editors argued that the academical approaches are varied, ranging from: “the point of view of semiotics, theatre studies, narratology, game studies, cultural text analysis, post-modern identity theory, communication studies, psychology, pedagogy, philosophy, and textual analysis” (Montola and Stenros 2004, xi). Another form of “bridge building” is taking place at the level of content. While *Knutepunkt* started out as a discussion on LARP, Montola and Stenros also included articles on PnP RPGs and computer-mediated role-play. The most descriptive article in the book is Merja Leppälahti’s “About the Community of Role-Players.” As a folklorist, she aims to offer a view from the “outside,” understanding the Finnish role-playing community as a subculture: “I do not play role-playing games myself, and my interest in them is purely academic” (Leppälahti 2004, 289). Leppälahti describes the community of role-players as a postmodern “neotribe” (Maffesoli 1995), which is organized on the basis of free will.

For *Dissecting Larp* (Bøckman and Hutchison 2005), the editors experimented with a “peer-review” process because of the many articles that were submitted. According to the editors themselves this was not a peer-review process according to scientific standards: “[...] there exists no set definition as to what makes one an expert on larp matters. Neither is there any larpers holding a doctorate

³³ The first *Knutepunkt* book was published in 2001, but is no longer available: Anette Alsvåg, Ingrid Storrø, Erlend Eidsem Hansen (eds.): *The Book. Knudepunkt 2001*. In 2002 there was no publication.

in larp. We have elected to let the writers them selves be each others peers, holding to what academic standard there is" (Bøckman and Hutchison 2005, 7-8).

The *Knutepunkt* conference and proceedings *Role, Play, Art* (Fritzon and Wrigstad 2006) was very deliberately aimed at "bridge building" between the different networks: "We want to bridge the gap between theorists and practitioners, role-playing theorists and established academia and the gap between the role-playing scene and the rest of the society including established academia."³⁴ In the latest publication, *Lifelike* (Donnis, Gade, and Thorop 2007), the editors Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, and Line Thorup look back on their first *Knutepunkt* proceedings, *As Larp Grows Up* (2003), and note the difference between back then when they wanted to be taken seriously and now: "[...] these days plenty of people take larp serious – all over the Nordic countries, researchers are studying 'our' media" (Donnis, Gade, and Thorop 2007, 7). While it is remarkable how many of the authors are PhD students, sometimes even in the field of game research, the authors are simultaneously (re)constituting "inside" versus "outside" academia by talking about "our media" and stating that "*Lifelike* is serious – but hopefully without being boring."

Conclusions

"Inside" academia, MMORPGs are mainly studied as digital games and within the context of other digital games. Most scholars focus on the instrumental play that the PvE and PvP modes offer. Recently there has been a growing interest in role-play in MMORPGs. I believe that we need to understand online role-playing games in the context of analogue Fantasy RPGs such as PnP RPGs and LARP. Both "inside" and "outside" academia, analogue role-playing games are often understood from the perspective of social interaction and social construction. Many RPG theorists have shown how players negotiate meaning and identities between the real and the imaginary (Brenne 2005, Edwards 2004, Fine 1983, Kim 1997, Mackay 2001, Waskul and Lust 2004 and 2006).

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 to go beyond the concept of the magic circle because it refers to a preexisting artificiality of the game space that, 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.

34 <http://jeepen.org/knutpunkt/>

Based on an analysis of the ways in which role-play in Fantasy role-playing games has been theorized, I claimed that it is not enough to open up the magic circle by reformulations in terms of “screen” (Nieuwdorp 2005) or “porous membrane” (Castronova 2006). Instead, I proposed to withdraw from the concept of the magic circle and instead work from a network perspective.

The network perspective contributes to the three goals I have formulated in the introduction: First, to understand computer-mediated RPGs in the context of analogue RPGs and the network society. Secondly, understanding WoW as a network forces us to deal with the fact that actual play experiences are continually negotiated over the constructed boundaries of dichotomies such as real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline. Third, the network perspective allows us to understand how the different roles of game researchers, designers, and players are simultaneously intertwined and contested but always situated in the same networks.

It is from an understanding of the relations between players, designers, and researchers, that innovative research, design, and play grows. This is crucial in a time in which governments are funding game research in which different academic and design disciplines are brought together for the context-driven purpose of boosting both the local entertainment game industry and the development of game applications for education and training. Knowledge and innovation cannot be found in one node or hub, but in the interrelations of the network as

a whole. As in role-play, this requires negotiation of conflict by means of formal and informal rules in order to arrive at shared cognitive frames.

In the next and last chapter, I show what it means to go beyond the magic circle. Herein I will use my working definition of the process of role-playing games to theorize conflict and negotiation as it takes place in and around the *Argent Dawn* RP server. Furthermore, I illustrate what it means to describe and analyze role-play from the network perspective in which the roles and frames of researchers and players are closely intertwined but contested.

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 Shifte. 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 RPin, 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.

Conclu- sions and Implica- tions

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.

Methodo- logical Ap- pendix

Like any other player of *World of Warcraft* (WoW), I went through a number of ongoing socialization processes, including learning about the game and participating in the construction of social structures on the server by becoming a member of role-play communities and by actively forming role-play communities. Next to thinking and writing about WoW, I spent a few hours almost every day playing, reading, and posting to forums, talking to players over e-mail and MSN, and keeping the Snap Sisters' website updated. My main focus was on role-play, however, I also participated in instrumental play both in-character (IC) and out of character (OOC).

WoW brought me many interesting role-play experiences, playing the game and writing about it changed my life, also literally, as it changed the rhythm of my days. Playing could easily last for 8 hours in a row and until deep in the night. Furthermore, I often found myself thinking about WoW even when I was not playing or working on my research. To the dismay of my partner and offline friends, I cancelled appointments at times because, for example, "there was an important role-play event for which the Snap Sisters were commissioned to take snaps." Zoe became a very good friend and some player-characters I met through the game also became part of my social network.

Table 1 shows the three phases I distinguished in the two years that I played WoW. During the first months of play, I made myself familiar with the game mechanics and role-played low-profile, in order words, I often let others take the initiative and I did not participate in forum discussions. I stayed in-character (IC) most of the time, except for some conversations with players I already knew out of the context of the game (such as Zoe). My reasoning for this was twofold. What I personally enjoy about online role-play is being able to play without being distracted by the out of character (OOC) personality of other players. This makes the role-play experience more exciting and puts the focus on creating shared fantasies. Furthermore I decided to keep my other role of being researcher covert for the time being, as I did not want others to change their perception of me as a player-character because of it.

From an ethical point of view, ethnographers disagree if they are morally bound to give full disclosure and get formal consent from every potential participant in the research, or if soliciting formal informed consent from every participant in the ethnography is disruptive, unnecessary, and impossible. In studying role-play in WoW, this is complicated by the fact that the "hardcore" role-players that I was interested in, in the beginning tend to avoid OOC conversations. I found that the ethical aspect of the role conflict between being a player and a researcher can only be negotiated over time.

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Position	Covert	Covert and overt	Covert and overt
IC/OOC	Mainly IC interaction	IC (++) and OOC (+)	IC (+) and OOC (++)
Methods	Role-play Forum lurking	Role-play Forum participation Online interviews	Role-play Forum participation Online interviews Online discussion

Table 1: Three phases of role-play research over two years, in chronological order.

Phase 2 started when I decided to talk OOC with Alabast (Jørgen), via my character Yara, and I gave Alabast information about myself as a researcher. This was because Alabast was a proactive role-player who led a variety of role-play guilds, organized events and plots, and attempted to bring the different role-play communities on the server closer together. I wanted to be able to discuss his motivations OOC. Whether or not to reveal more about myself to Alabast was a hard decision to make because at that time I felt I had to choose between my enjoyment as a role-player and my role of being a researcher. Even though we continued to role-play and we had many conversations that shaped me as a player, researcher, and person, I sometimes regretted that I had to let go of a powerful dramatic conflict. Simultaneously I decided to become more proactive in my own role-play, and created characters that were focused on socializing into certain role-play communities that I heard about in-game or read about on the forums. If asked, I would give OOC information about myself, including being a researcher. Also, Zoe and I started the Snap Sisters and thereby actively influenced role-play on the server. Chapter 2 is mainly a description of the first and second phases.

In the third phase, I set up overt collaborations with other players. I told the group of players who I presented in chapter 2 that I was not only a player but also a researcher. They read and commented on the chapter and gave their consent for publication. Furthermore, I invited this group to participate in an in-game discussion in which I would use the themes presented in chapter 2 as a starting point. Meanwhile I started to discuss the concept of the Argent Archives webportal with Jørgen, and 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 started a Role-Play Theory 101 subforum in order to theorize role-play together with other players.

With regard to online research, the economist and researcher of hacking practices and software development, Yu-Wei Lin, argued that researchers are obliged to commit to a profound responsibility of engaging mutuality with respondents in interpreting, managing, analyzing, and revisiting ethnographic data collected from virtual environments (Lin 2004). Not only is mutuality a way to gain more insight into the complexity of computer-mediated social interaction, it is also a way to be reflective and to receive informed consent. I asked players informed consent for using real names (of both

their characters and themselves) throughout the thesis. The reasons for this are twofold: character names express part of the role-played personality, changing them would thus change the meaning of the experience. In chapter 4 I elaborated on meaning of character names. Secondly, I consider those players who's first name is mentioned to be collaborators in my research. Although the overall construction of the thesis is mine, these players have all read and commented on (parts of) my work which I incorporated into the final text. Especially in chapter 4 I aimed to experiment with collaborative research by presenting an analysis of online role-play as a discussion between fellow players and me, seen from my perspective.

Theorizing together with other players is not only beneficial for researchers and designers, it also helps players to find others who share a similar interest in the game. As I have shown in chapter 3, since *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), players have been theorizing in order to shape like-minded communities. On WoW forums, both official and unofficial, players are slowly developing a similar discussion. Most of the time this is still at the level of an argument between the different play styles, which was also the main discussion topic for pen and paper role-playing games during the 1980s. By discussing my work with players, in-game, over e-mail, MSN and on Zoe's forum I hope to have made a start of pulling the discussion on role-play in MMORPGs to a next level, thus shaping role-play communities and in-depth ethnographical research.

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Samenvat- ting

Game onderzoek wordt op dit moment gekenmerkt door een (re)constructie van omstreden grenzen zoals de zogenoemde "magic circle", de magische cirkel van de spelervaring. Als gevolg van deze afbakening worden verschillende problematische dichotomieën gecreëerd, bijvoorbeeld tussen dat wat "echt" en dat wat "denkbeeldig" is, waardoor de complexiteit van game play, design en onderzoek verborgen blijft. Door games en met name het spelen van games te begrijpen vanuit een netwerk perspectief beoog ik in deze dissertatie voorbij te gaan aan het concept van de magische cirkel. Mijn casestudie is "role-play" (rollenspel) in de online game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), waarbij spelers de rol van hun Fantasy personage spelen als ware het een vorm van improvisatie theater. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) vat ik op als netwerken van sociale interactie waarbij spelers (menselijke actoren) zowel met elkaar als met het systeem (niet-menselijke actoren) interacteren. Door dit proces van interactie geven role-players betekenis en ontstaan er sociale relaties die niet te vangen zijn in eenvoudige tegenstellingen zoals acteren of niet acteren (door spelers aangeduid als "in-character" en "out-of-character"), in het spel en buiten het spel, echt en denkbeeldig, vrije tijd en werk of educatie, virtueel en materieel, online en offline.

Het concept van *World of Warcraft* is terug te voeren tot het Fantasy rollenspel *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D, 1974), waarbij spelers niet met de computer, maar met behulp van pen, papier en dobbelstenen spelen. De ontwikkeling van deze Fantasy games en hun vertaling naar het digitale domein vond plaats gedurende de afgelopen dertig jaar, een periode die volgens de socioloog Manuel Castells gekenmerkt wordt door de opkomst van de "network society", een netwerkcultuur. Door middel van empirische casestudies brengt Castells in zijn trilogie *The Information Age: economy, society and culture* (1996, 1997 en 1998) in kaart hoe we sinds het einde van de jaren zestig een verschuiving kunnen waarnemen van hiërarchieën naar netwerken in alle lagen van de maatschappij. Het werk van Castells is onderdeel van een groeiend discours van netwerktheorie waarbij onze maatschappij, inclusief wetenschap zelf, wordt begrepen als een complex systeem dat verweven is met informatie- en communicatie technologieën. Om online games te onderzoeken vanuit een netwerkperspectief heb ik gebruik gemaakt van de "Actor Network Theory" zoals die is geformuleerd in *Science and Technology Studies* (Callon 1986, Law 1987, Latour 1987, 2005), Thomas Gieryn's concept van "boundary work" (Gieryn 1983, 1999) en Erving Goffman's werk over sociale interactie (Goffman 1956, 1974). Eveneens ben ik geïnspireerd door Donna Haraway's werk over "situatedness", een cruciale toevoeging aan de netwerktheorie, waarin zij zichtbaar maakt hoe academici zelf onderdeel uit maken van constant veranderende netwerkstructuren (Haraway 1991).

Deze dissertatie draagt bij aan 1) een begrip van online role-playing games als netwerken die verbonden zijn met het dagelijks leven, Fantasy game cultuur, en de technologische en sociaal-culturele ontwikkelingen van de afgelopen dertig jaar; 2) een beschrijving en analyse van "role-play" als een specifieke MMORPG speelstijl die wordt gekenmerkt door onderhandelingsprincipes. De focus op onderhandeling laat zien hoe rollen, conventies, identiteiten en interpersoonlijke relaties tot stand

komen in en door middel van het systeem van een commercieel gedistribueerde game; en als laatste 3) inzicht in de wijze waarop multi-player game play, design en onderzoek nauw met elkaar verweven zijn.

Het denken voorbij het concept van de magische cirkel heeft verregaande implicaties voor zowel epistemologie en educatie in game onderzoek en design. Een netwerk epistemologie vereist interdisciplinair onderzoek waarin niet alleen Geesteswetenschappen en de Sociale wetenschappen met elkaar verweven worden maar eveneens relaties aangegaan worden met Bètawetenschappen. Dit perspectief vraagt bovendien om een maatschappelijke contextualisering van het academisch debat. Het is van belang om verbindingen te maken tussen fundamentele en toegepaste theoretisering "binnen" en "buiten" de academia, zoals dit gedaan wordt door zowel spelers, ontwerpers, en academici; verschillende rollen die steeds vaker in één persoon gevonden kunnen worden. Educatie vanuit een netwerkperspectief bestaat uit het onderwijzen van een specialisme binnen de context van andere onderzoeks- en designdisciplines. Mijn inziens leidt een dergelijke opleiding op tot het vermogen om met passie onverwachte mixen te creëren, hetgeen cruciaal is voor toekomstige innovatieve ontwikkelingen in game play, design en onderzoek.

Curriculum Vitae

Marinka Copier was born on 1 November 1976 in Heemstede. She went to primary school *De Sparrenbos* in Bennebroek and meanwhile developed an interest in computers and performance. In 1995 she received her secondary school diploma from the *Eerste Christelijk Lyceum* in Haarlem, and started studying History with a specialization in new media, gender studies and cultural education at *Utrecht University*. Early 2001 she finished her master thesis on the female warriors Joan of Arc and Lara Croft. In 2001 and 2002 she studied elderly gamers at the *University of Maastricht* and the *International Institute for Infonomics*. In 2002 she became a teacher and researcher at the Faculty of Humanities (the Department for Media and Re/Presentation (IMR) and the Research Institute for History and Culture (OGC) of *Utrecht University*. She was co-organizer of the first Digital Games Research Association Conference (DiGRA, Level Up, 2003) at *Utrecht University*, DiGRA board member and co-founder of many game research initiatives in the Netherlands. Currently she is a teacher and post-doctorate game researcher at Utrecht University and director of the Utrecht School of Art and Technology (USAT) at the Faculty of Art, Media and Technology of the *Utrecht School of the Arts*.

YOU NEED TO BELIEVE IN THINGS THAT
AREN'T TRUE.
HOW ELSE CAN THEY *BECOME*?

Terry Pratchett, Hogfather

Currently, game research is characterized by the (re)construction of contested boundaries such as the "magic circle" of the game experience. These boundaries create dichotomies between the real and the imaginary that hide the complexity of actual play, design and research. Marinka Copier proposes to go "beyond the magic circle" in order to understand games and play from a network perspective. Her case study is role-play in the online game *World of Warcraft*, whereby players act out the roles of their Fantasy characters.