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 jewelery, 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 emergences 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 de-
*tailed 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 of-
fering insight into complexity, instead of mapping a material domain or providing a singular social ex-
planation (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 trac-
ing 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 behav-
ior 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 and 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?