Contextualizing Gaming Practices

MMORPG Players and 'Real Life'

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Abstract

From a game studies perspective this thesis takes a closer look at the way Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) players construct and make use of the concept 'real life' in their communication with other players. The terminology, used by both players and researchers, to discuss online gaming experiences depart from presupposed notions of 'real life', 'real world', 'ordinary life' or 'everyday life' which are contrasted to the game world. An analysis of player communication on a role-play discussion forum of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* shows that concepts used to communicate about online gaming experiences indicate a separation between an online game environment and an offline non-game environment. While the concepts used to communicate imply a separation, the issues discussed by these concepts show the strong interrelation between game and non-game environments and refute a clear separation.

While the increasing move away from the concept of the *magic circle* in game theory towards an acknowledgement of games as not separated from the 'rest of the world' and as not separated in space and time is in line with the findings of the empirical data, terminology used by game researchers still indicates a dichotomy between a game world and a non-game world. 'Real life', 'real world' and 'ordinary life' or 'everyday life' are normalized concepts for both players and researchers and can hold (normative) connotations which underplay actual gaming practices. In order to account for the situatedness of players, their experiences and the increasing mundane activity of playing online games I will argue that theoretically there is a need to be conscious of presupposed concepts and terminology used. Furthermore, instead of separating play and game from 'ordinary life' the aspects of space and time show that gaming is not a bounded off practice. Terminology, players, games and gaming practices, therefore, need to be contextualized in time and space.

Keywords

video games, MMORPG, forum, player, terminology, magic circle, real life

Contents

Prologue

This thesis discusses the way in which players of Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) construct concepts such as 'real life' (RL). The special and complex relation between my personal experiences and the topic of my research has provided the basis for my research. Therefore I believe a small introduction of my personal connection to the topic of this thesis is in place here.

Although I have always been interested in media and played computer games throughout my whole life, it was only two years ago that my fascination for MMORPGs began. In May 2005 I took the university course *Rules of the Game*. In order to participate it was mandatory to play the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WoW). Since then I have played anything between three hours a week to nine hours a day. I have played several characters on different role-play realms; I have met guild members outside the game; I have conducted my first in-game research[1]; and I have moved from the Netherlands to Sweden to live with my fiancé whom I met in-game. Since my very first introduction to MMORPGs these virtual worlds have captured my interest and this thesis is the result of following up on one of the many fascinating aspects I encountered.

Of course I could not have done this work without the help of many others, and I would like to use this space to show my appreciation to the many players with whom I have played over time. I would like to thank all those who have supported and helped me during my research and writing process. Specifically, I would like to mention and thank my fiancé, John, for his love, support, and trust, and for showing me the same world, but through different eyes. Furthermore, I would like to express my special thanks to Dr. Marinka Copier for the excellent guidance; innovating ideas; practical help; wise advice in hard times; everlasting patience; eternal trust and never wavering support.

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[1] See 'Wolf Clan: Guild Functions in World of Warcraft' (Vollenbroek, forthcoming). The article is an ethnographical account which discusses the functions role-play guilds fulfil for their members.

1. What is 'real life'?

> Real Life can be very addictive: Girls, food, sleep, toilets, the sun, the sky, work, family, friends, all these things are designed to keep you into the Real Life, and away from WOW. […] I've seen cases of people leaving their guild and cancelling their subscription, simply because they have been trapped into Real Life. Devices such as Marriage, Family and Sex, are extremely harmful to WOW players, and are designed to keep people away from playing. […] If you're not careful, one day you'll look back on your life, and think: "What have I really achieved? Sure, I have a kids and a wife, but I have no Epics. My professions are not at 300, my guild is still stuck at Ragnaros, and I've never even seen AQ40." And when that empty feeling hits you, it will probably be too late to go back. Think. If you're not careful, Real Life can kill your WOW.[2]
> (*World of Warcraft* player, *World of Warcraft* general discussion forum)

This quote is part of a post made by a player of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (WoW, Blizzard Entertainment 2004) on the general discussion forum of the game. The post makes fun of the discussion about the danger of games that will lead people to abandon their 'real life' (RL) and ironically states that it is 'real life' that is dangerous for gaming. The use of this concept of 'real life' is not uncommon among players of computer games or users of online environments (Bartle 2004; Markham 1998; Turkle 2004; Wertheim1999). During many playing sessions on role-play realms in WoW I noticed references to RL are commonly and frequently made by its players.[3] It seemed that playing the game was not part of this 'real life'. The online gaming experiences are somehow separated from the offline non-gaming experiences and within this division the online gaming experiences are subordinated to those offline, less important and less 'real. 'Real life's' counterpart, which we expect is the game environment, is never explicitly mentioned by the players.

Not only players of online games but also studies of games and online environments discuss the relation between online and offline spaces, worlds and activities with concepts such as virtual reality, cyberspace, ordinary life, real life and reality. Generally, a division is made between an online and an offline world or space. The online world represents different rules and possibilities, a different (virtual) reality, and often seems disconnected or juxtaposed to the offline world or reality (Bell et al. 2004; Brooks 2003; Markham 1998; Rheingold 1991; Slater 2002; Steuer 1993; Vince 2004; Wertheim 1999). Furthermore, a division between game space and the rest of the world, or 'real world', is commonly made in the area of game studies (Bartle 2004; Castronova 2005; Copier 2006; Juul 2005: Kelly 2 2004; Lauteren 2007; Nieuwdorp 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006: Salen and Zimmerman 2004;

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[2] Quotations have not been altered to improve spelling or grammar.
[3] My observation of the way in which players seemed to talk about 'real life' and offline activities took shape while I was collecting data (and experience) for another paper: "Wolf Clan: Guild Functions in World of Warcraft" (Vollenbroek, forthcoming).

Taylor 2005). Based upon Johan Huizinga's *magic circle* game researchers and game developers have constructed the concept of a *magic circle* in order to define games and indicate two main aspects: play as something "outside "ordinary" life" and as separated in time and space (Copier 2006; Huizinga 1949, 13; Lauteren 2007; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). In contrast to this separation recent studies that historically contextualize the *magic circle*; propose new models; and report new findings argue for a porous *magic circle* or membrane, a blurring of boundaries or a less strict separation of game space and the rest of the world (Castronova 2005; Copier 2006; Lauteren 2007; Nieuwdorp 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Taylor 2005). Yet game definitions which include a separation between the game and the rest of the world persist. Research remains focused on the construction and experience of synthetical, fictional, online worlds or games in comparison to a fundamental 'real world' or 'real life' (Bartle 2004; Castronova 2005; Copier 2006; Juul 2005: Kelly 2 2004; Nieuwdorp 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006: Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Taylor 2005). The use of such concepts in contrast to a virtual (gaming) world can be problematic as they reinforce a distinction and separateness, and generally privilege the 'real' above the virtual which can imply that the online experiences are not 'real' (Bell et al. 2004, 126; Wertheim 1999). As sociologist Don Slater (2002) argues "[i]t is the making of the distinction [between online and offline] that needs studying, rather than assuming it exists and then studying its consequences." (543)

Altogether, both players of online games and researchers of games and online environments question a distinction between a 'real life' and a virtual or game world, while using concepts that indicate a dichotomy at the same time. The concept 'real life' is contextual, but is generally used as part of a binary distinction, often as the opposite of something 'not-real'. The concepts seem self-explanatory and their use normalized. Although different terms or similar concepts are used to address the 'real life', this thesis refers to 'real life' or RL as it is the term most commonly used by players.[4] In the first set up of this research I struggled with naming a counterpart of 'real life' as I wanted to look at the way players describe their relation between 'daily life' and the game, or between 'real life' and 'virtual life'. However, the relation between players and (online) games is a complex one and we should try to move away from the use of dichotomies in describing users relation to games and online environments. The practice of this is much harder to realize than its proposition (Castronova 2005; Juul 2005; Markham 1998; Taylor 2005). Collecting data I found that 'real

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[4] A short explanation of terminology and abbreviations related to MMORPGs and gaming used throughout this thesis can be found in the glossary.

life' does not necessarily refer to a dichotomy; it is a contextualized concept and its counterpart(s) remain(s) unnamed.

The aim of this research is to take a closer look at how players construct their relation to an online game and 'real life' without applying predefined theoretical models. Players use concepts to indicate 'real life', but not the virtual. So, instead of looking at the construction of the virtual with a fundamental real as starting point, an analysis of empirical data provided by players allows us to move away from assumed dichotomies and reflect upon the theoretical discourse of game studies concerning the *magic circle* and (supposed) separateness of game space and 'real world'. Furthermore, this research provides more insight in the relation between game and player; online environments and their users; the game and the 'rest of the world'; and encourages to critically re-examine the use of concepts such as 'real life'. This thesis discusses *how* players of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* construct the concept 'real life'.

Where to look for 'real life'

In order to analyse the way in which MMORPG players construct 'real life' I have analysed data collected from a role-play realm forum of *World of Warcraft* over a period of 45 days.[5] With more than 8.5 million subscribers WoW is currently one of the most popular MMORPGs.[6] To regulate the enormous amount of players, players are divided over different realms where they play alone and together in the 3D world Azeroth to explore, defeat monsters, solve quests, create and play out characters, battle each other, gain experience points, and interact with each other. Blizzard Entertainment not only provides players with a game but also with forum space where players can communicate with each other about the game. These forums offer a place where players communicate about their experiences with other players which can be analysed without the limitations of (having to establish) an in-game network of connections if one was to conduct research in-game. In the first set up of this research interviews were going to enrich the forum data; however the data from the forum turned out to be so rich that I did not want to discredit it with adding interviews. Furthermore, the focus of this research is how players communicate with each other on their own terms about 'real life', and not how players communicate about the concept with a researcher.

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[5] While posters on forums are always players, players are not always posters. However, in this thesis posters and players are used synonymously when discussing data gathered from forums.
[6] Blizzard Entertainment, "World of Warcraft surpasses 8 million subscribers worldwide," http://www.blizzard.co.uk/press/070111.shtml (accessed June 24, 2007).

Within the community section of the WoW website there are many different forums; such as a technical forum, support forums, a general role-play forum, class specific forums, and realm specific forums. In order to better understand how players communicate with each other this research is based on the analysis of the role-play realm forum of Steamwheedle Cartel (SWC).[7] The advantage of reading a realm specific forum is that one gets a better understanding of the community and its members, which helps to recognize connections between different messages. Because of the linguistic nature of role-play and the explicit need for a distinction between 'in character' (IC) and 'out of character' (OOC) behaviour I choose to focus on a role-play realm. Role-players deal consciously, and sometimes less consciously, with concepts and ideas concerning distinctions between game spaces, realities and identities in their play style (Fine 1983). It is important, however, to realize that not all players have the same play style and that not all players on a role-play realm indeed role-play.

Why look at 'real life'?

Even though game studies are concerned with the relation between players and games, to my knowledge the common use of an ambiguous concept such as 'real life' by players has not been researched. This is astonishing because the use of the concept conveys the players' relation to online and offline worlds, game and non-game worlds. Furthermore, it is important to look at the way users of technologies themselves make sense of their experiences without imposing pre-existing theoretical models if we want to understand their relation to technology (Markham 1998; Slater 2002; Taylor 2005). As Markham (1998) and Slater (2002) argue, it is especially the construction and use of concepts that distinguish between online and offline that need attention instead of accepting them beforehand.

In order to better understand players' use and construction of 'real life' and to better understand players' experiences and their relation to video games and 'the rest of the world' empirical data is needed. Theoretical frameworks not only help to understand our analysis and empirical findings, but incorporating actual experiences of players also helps us improve our theoretical models (Copier 2005; Markham 1998; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Slater 2002; Taylor 2005).[8] The analysis of the construction of 'real life' by players provides empirical data of players which is strongly connected to the current discourse in game studies on the (supposed) separateness of game space and 'real world'. In light of the empirical data

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[7] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Steamwheedle Cartel forum," http://forums.wow-europe.com/board.html?forumId=1143&sid=1 (accessed June 24, 2007).
[8] For a good example of how experiences of players can lead to a re-evaluation of existing frameworks see: Pargman and Jakobsson (2006).

theoretical concepts indicating separations and dichotomies, such as the *magic circle*, will be reflected upon. As both players and theorists commonly use concepts such as 'real life', 'real world', 'everyday life' and 'ordinary life' a critical analysis of the use of these concepts by players will also lead to a critical review of how these and similar concepts are used by theorists.

In short, this thesis is concerned with broadening our understanding of the relation between players and online games, and in an even broader understanding of online technology and its users. It enriches the game studies discourse with empirical data of players and a critical review of concepts that are currently used to describe the relation between online game worlds and the offline world. Furthermore, it asks us to be aware of normalized concepts that we use and the meanings that they imply.

What is to come

Before we look at the way in which players construct and make use of the concept 'real life' the research needs to be contextualized. Chapter two, therefore, briefly addresses the player community of Steamwheedle Cartel, the role-play realm policy and the functioning of the WoW forum space. Furthermore, general findings of reading the forum over a period of 45 days will be presented and we will see that the Steamwheedle Cartel forum is a dominated role-play space mainly used to communicate about WoW topics concerning the SWC community.

In chapter three a detailed reading of specific threads taken from the forum are the basis for an analysis of the construction and use of 'real life'.[9] The concept of 'real life' and similar concepts will be addressed briefly. Following the different accounts in which players use and refer to 'real life' we will see that it is a normalized, self-explanatory but ambiguous concept. 'Real life' can be used as an excuse in itself; indicate everything out-of-game; refer to everything offline; refer to non-computer related issues; be opposed as well as compared to the in-game world; and 'real life' can relate to player behaviour and time management. The use of the concept indicates both a blurring and a separation of game world and 'real world'.

It is this (non)separation that is the topic of chapter four, where theoretical frameworks of game studies will be used to reflect upon the findings of chapter three. Furthermore, the empirical data is used to reflect upon existing game theory. First of all, concepts used by theorists will be discussed, followed by a short discussion about the way games have been

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[9] A thread is an original post, the first post, on a forum and all its replies.

defined and a reflection on the *magic circle* and the games' separateness from the 'rest of the world'. The location of the player and time management will help to expose the unclear boundaries between game and non-game.

In conclusion we will see that 'real life' is a normalized and frequently used concept by both players as well as researchers. It is an ambiguous and normative term which, in context, can refer to an out-of-character, out-of-game, or an offline state. While it seemingly refers to a distinction, the counterpart of 'real life' is not explicitly named by players and the actual use of the term exemplifies that there is no clear separation between game and 'real life'. Computer games, especially online computer games, seem to be located outside our 'daily real life'. An analysis of the construction of 'real life' by players, however, deconstructs dichotomies and shows us that playing online games is not as separated as the concepts we use to discuss the activity might indicate.

2. Steamwheedle Cartel

A player community

Yes folks. Next Tuesday our server celebrates its first birthday!

Happy Birthday Steamwheedle!!

Hurrah for Steamwheedle!

raises a cup of moonberry juice
To a new year on Steamwheedle Cartel! And to those that keep the community alive!
(WoW players on the SWC forum, "Happy Birthday SwC" thread)

These quotes have been taken from a thread of the Steamwheedle Cartel forum of *World of Warcraft* and refer to the one year existence of the Steamwheedle Cartel realm. They show that players of SWC see themselves as a community, it is *their* realm and *their* community. In order to better understand and interpret the data collected from reading the forum this chapter contextualizes the data. It briefly addresses the community aspect of SWC, the extra dimension of role-play, and the forum space. After that an overview of the general findings of reading the SWC forum are presented.

Communities are important for MMORPGs -as a part of their attraction and as a way of keeping players engaged- and game design intentionally encourages community formation. Player communities consist of groups of players that interact and can exist on different levels; they can exist over time and over multiple games or apply to just one time and/or game (Bartle 2004; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Taylor 2005). On their website Blizzard has a special community section, which is aimed at the whole community of WoW, all WoW players.[10] Within this WoW community the different realms can be viewed as communities as well. Communities exist on an even smaller level on the realms in the form of guilds, guild associations, raiding communities and role-play communities.[11] That the players of SWC indeed view the population of the realm as a community is exemplified by the quotes above.

Player communities are established by players and designers, although most of the formation of a community is dependant upon its members, and design can only do so much (Bartle 2004; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Taylor 2005). The age of a realm is important for the strength and establishment of its community. A player community does not come into being as soon as a game or realm is created but is dependent upon relationships between players and player groups and therefore takes time to grow (Bartle 2004). In this sense it is important to know that Steamwheedle Cartel is a one-year old realm and its players have

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[10] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, http://www.wow-europe.com/en/index.xml (accessed June 24, 2007).

[11] A raid is "A large-scale attack on an area by a group of parties and players." (Blizzard 2004).

created their own wiki page, which merged with the general WoWWiki[12]. SWC has its own ventrillo channel, mIRC channel, and special websites for different communities on SWC, such as guild websites and a Horde RP community website.[13]

It is important though that player communities are not homogenous, but that play and players are situated. Players are individuals with their own background and pre-existing knowledge (Bartle 2004; Juul 2005; Salazar 2005; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Taylor 2005). This research focuses on the forum space of the game, and is thus concerned with those players that post on the forum, but not all players of a game participate on the forums (Bartle 2004). What is important to keep in mind is that Steamwheedle Cartel is a player community and is experienced by players themselves as a community. Player communities consist of individual players with pre-existing knowledge and experience and may or may not have common characteristics.

A role-play realm

Because of the vast number of players and in order to accommodate different play styles, there are three different realm types in *World of Warcraft*: Player versus Environment (PvE), Player versus Player (PvP) and Role-Play (RP). Steamwheedle Cartel is a European Role-Play realm that was launched the 9th of January 2006. Role-play is a social and narrative form of play where players collaborate to enact imaginary characters in an imaginary world (Bartle 2004; Castronova 2005; Copier 2006; Fine 2002; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Sandoval 2006; Taylor 2005). Role-play is linguistic and role-players make use of 'out of character' (OOC) and 'in character' (IC) distinctions to distinguish between the fictional and non-fictional world. In WoW role-playing is related to the fictional world of Blizzard's Warcraft series (Sandoval 2006). Because role-play has no clear set goals or final outcome it questions game definitions and is generally seen as a borderline case (Bartle 2004; Copier 2006; Juul 2005; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

Blizzard's game manual only mentions PvE and PvP realms, the RP realms are only mentioned on the WoW website.[14] In order "to establish and maintain the most immersive environment possible" Blizzard has implemented a role-playing policy for RP realms in

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[12] WoWWiki, the Warcraft Wiki, "Server: Steamwheedle Cartel Europe," http://www.wowwiki.com/Realm:Steamwheedle_Cartel_Europe (accessed June 24, 2007).
[13] Ventrillo is a voice communication program, while mIRC is a chat program.
Steamwheedle Cartel Roleplaying Community, http://steamwheedlecartel.euweb.cz/ (accessed June 24, 2007).
[14] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Realm types," http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/basics/realmtypes.html (accessed June 24, 2007).

addition to the general policies.[15] These rules discourage communication and behaviour which are not in line with the story line of *World of Warcraft* and disrupt the immersion of living in WoW. Players in WoW may role-play and gain an increase of gaming pleasure from role-playing, but it will not give them advantages or rewards in the game (Sandoval 2006).[16] In light of this research role-play is interesting because of its boundary status and because players explicitly distinguish between the fictional and non-fictional world.

A forum space

Blizzard Entertainment provides different sorts of forums under their community section on the WoW website. There are technical, general, guild recruitment, quest, profession, raid, role-play, class specific, realm specific and more forums. The forums provide a community space where players can communicate with each other, exchange ideas and provide feedback.[17] While anyone can read the forums only people with a WoW account can post. In order to post on a forum you have to log in with your WoW account and choose a character from your account which represents the poster. Players can respond to each others messages in threads or create their own threads. Threads can also become 'sticky', which means that a thread will remain at the top of the forum, regardless of its last reply.[18]

Since Blizzard provides and moderates the forums there are special rules and policies for the forums. If people violate these rules they can be banned from the forums. Offensive content, cheating tips, distribution of sexual images, chain letters or pyramid schemes, 'spam' or any form of content which is considered objectionable by Blizzard is not allowed.[19] This means that posters on the forums are restricted in the topics they discuss and the way they communicate. The Steamwheedle Cartel forum, however, is a place for the whole SWC community, while other forums concerning the community are generally more group specific and not aimed at the whole SWC community. Furthermore, the restrictions are to prevent harassment and since there are no restrictions to discussing 'real life' the policies should not be too limiting for research on the construction and use of 'real life'.

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[15] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Game policies," http://www.wow-europe.com/en/policy/ (accessed June 24, 2007).World of Warcraft Europe website – policy (accessed March 2007)-
[16] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Realm types," http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/basics/realmtypes.html (accessed June 24, 2007).
[17] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Forum index," http://forums.wow-europe.com/index.html?sid=1 (accessed June 24, 2007).
[18] Threads containing the most recent posts are located at the top of the forum, with the exception of 'sticky' threads.
[19] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Forums," http://forums.wow-europe.com/forum-coc.html?sid=1 (accessed June 24, 2007).

The knowledge presented on forums and third party websites exhibit community knowledge and the participants of forums can be seen as a community in itself (Taylor 2005). As Jeff Moyer, founder of Allakhazam states: "The forums are really a community in themselves. Frequent posters gain reputations through the quality or type of posts they make, and friendships and rivalries develop based solely upon the posts people make." (quoted in Taylor 2005, 104) Even though the posters of the forum represent a small part of the player community of WoW, as explained in the introduction, this research is concerned with those players that communicate with each other about their experiences and the best place for this is the forum.

As Taylor (2005) shows forums and third party websites are important for the gaming experience and gaming community. Because of their importance for the actual act of playing in game and because in-game play is sometimes continued on forums and websites, the boundaries of the *magic circle* –between game and non-game- are challenged (Castronova 2005; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Taylor 2005). Whether or not the forum is an extension of the game and the specific role of forums for the player community is not the point of discussion here. What is important is that the forum provides the player community with a space where players communicate with other players about the game.

Reading the forum

On the 15th of December 2006 I read all threads (66) of the first page of the Steamwheedle Cartel forum, and since that day I read the forum every day over a period of 45 days. As soon as a thread went to the second page, meaning that it had not received replies for a longer period of time, I wrote down the thread and its main concern. On the 4th of January 2007 Blizzard changed the forums and a special Community events forum was launched. Future RP events were supposed to be posted on this forum. I read this forum too, but only in reference to SWC. However, since the forum is not realm specific, and thus all events from all RP realms are mixed, it is not practical in its overview and during my reading period there have only been 3 short threads concerning SWC which were moved there by Blizzard. These threads could still be found on the SWC forum as well. Over the 45-days period I have read 275 threads. Of these 275 I saved 64 threads in which players directly or more indirectly discussed, referred to or mentioned 'real life'. These posts have been used for the further analysis of the construction of 'real life' in chapter three.

Forum categories

Based on the list of threads I collected over the research period an overview can be formed which provides a general idea of the kind of posts that can be found on the forum (figure 1). This chart also gives an idea of the threads I used to analyse the way players talk about 'real life' and their relation to the game. The different categories assigned to the threads are artificial and threads can often be categorized in several categories, for example a post concerning character migration accompanied by the character's background story could be considered both as a migration topic and a RP story topic. The threads are categorized based on the content of the original poster and what seemed most prominent for the original poster. However, threads can be diverted from the original poster's intent and start a discussion concerning a different topic than what the thread originally started out to discuss. This is not taken into account in the categorization of the threads, and threads taken for further analysis can in fact be based on later replies in a thread. Although I logged the amount of replies of the different threads, these are not visible in the chart. It should be clear that the categorization and chart by no means are meant to be an undisputable impression of the forum. However, the chart helps to provide a general idea of the type of posts players make and in which they address 'real life'.

Category	Sub-category	Total	Threads taken	Nr. Of stickies out of total	Stickies taken
Role-play					
	RP event	31	11		
	RP story	46	11		
	RP recruitment	23	5	1	
	RP mechanical	18	6	4	2
	TBC RP	6	2		
Instrumental play					
	Character development	10	2	2	
	Raid recruitment	15	3		
	Gameplay	25	2		
	TBC	9	3		
	LFG	16	3		
	Character migration	7	2		
	Technical	14	1		
	Realm	9	3	5	1
	Blizzard	4	1	1	
Player					
	Forum game	7	2		
	LFP	2	2		
	Specified message	9	2		
	Greetings	15	1		
	Fan art	9	2	1	1
Total		275	64	14	4

Figure 1. Overview of threads during time of research.

The different categories I reduced from the threads concern role-play issues, instrumental play issues, and player issues. Within the role-play category threads labelled *RP events* refer to threads concerning announcements and/or organizational issues and/or reports on player organized role-play events. *RP story* refers to 'in character' threads with IC storylines of characters; IC character development; IC guild developments and standpoints in relation to role-play storylines, lore or community developments. *RP recruitment* threads are concerned with the recruitment of players for RP guilds and/or communities. The *RP mechanical* threads deal with 'how to RP' and add-ons for RP. Threads focusing on the impact and accountability for changes due to *The Burning Crusade* (TBC) expansion related to role-play have been labelled *TBC RP*.[20]

The instrumental play category refers to issues related to instrumental game play within the game. Instrumental play in this sense means game play as provided by the game, and technical issues concerning the game play as provided by Blizzard. Within this category *character development* threads concern issues related to players, characters and guilds that have reached a certain level, gained a special skill, or achieved a certain goal first, also called 'firsts'. Guilds and communities that recruit players for raids and the rare non-RP guild recruitment have been categorized under *raid recruitment*. The subcategory *gameplay* holds threads that deal with non-RP related tips on non-player characters (NPC's), quests, bosses, and the exchange of recipes and gear. *TBC* refers to threads concerned with content of the TBC expansion especially related to gear and instances. Threads where players look for groups or guilds have been labelled *LFG* (Looking For Group). *Character migration* threads concern players who want to migrate a character to SWC or that are migrating a character from SWC to another realm. The *technical problems* threads concern violations of non-RP related policies, system failures and problems with lag and the forum. The subcategory *realm community* refers to threads that are concerned with the realm community on an instrumental play or technical level. For example, an overview of all the guilds on the realm, links to the SWC wikipedia page and ventrillo channel. Threads claiming that SWC is the best realm are also labelled as *realm community*. Lastly, the *blizzard* threads refer to threads or a post made by a gamemaster (GM) of Blizzard.

The last category, player, holds subcategories that are not specifically in-game nor specifically out-of-game related. *Forum games* refers to threads where small forum games,

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[20] *The Burning Crusade* is an expansion pack for *World of Warcraft*, released the 16th of January 2007. The expansion introduces new content in the form of new playable areas and instances, new playable races, new quests, a new profession and new mounts which are also accounted for in an expansion of the lore.

which all relate to WoW, are played. The forum games consist of riddles related to the WoW universe, a 'how famous is the person above you?', a 'rumor has it…' thread and the ^<v game, in these last three games comments can relate to the in-game character as well as the player.[21] Threads that are looking for specific players are categorized under *LFP*, Looking For Player. The *specified message* subcategory refers to threads that are aimed at specific players, characters, guilds or communities. *Greetings* refers to threads where players say 'hello' in general, and to specific threads such as the one year anniversary of the realm and Happy Christmas and New Years wishes threads. The last subcategory is *fan art* and consists of threads that contain, link to or promote fan made magazines and art.

Role-play category

As we can see in the overview (figure 1) the majority of the threads on the SWC forum concern role-play issues (124 threads). The RP community dominates the SWC forum space. This is not only clear in the amount of threads concerning RP, but also in the amount of replies to threads. Certain threads did not get replies at all, while others might got around 40 replies. In general the RP threads got more replies than threads in other categories, with the exception of the *forum games*. Not only the topic of a thread decides whether or not players will reply, who posts plays an important role as well. Reading the forum it became clear that certain players more or less dominate the forum. On the SWC forum the active and regular posters are role-players. Around 10 role-players are the most active posters and seem to be respected within the community. Whenever a thread is started by one of these players it will certainly get replies and they will generally reply on each other's posts as well. Posters that are familiar with each other, for example guild members, seem to reply on each others posts. However, there was one player who created a lot of threads and also replied often on other threads, but this player's contributions were not much appreciated and other posters often commented on the unnecessary posts and threads of this player.[22]

That the forum is a dominated RP space is not only clear from the amount of RP threads, replies and posters, but also from the content of the posts. Threads created by reasonably unknown posters did not get many replies, if they got replies at all, however when the post concerned a role-play issue it did get replies. But the emphasis on role-play was most clear in the many discussions which addressed role-play, or the lack thereof, on the realm.

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[21] In the ^<v game posters state a claim about the poster above them ^, about themselves <, and about the poster that will post next v. These claims can relate to both the player and/or the played character.
[22] See chapter three "Role-play and 'real life'" *Player versus character* for more discussion about this particular player.

This was especially clear in threads of the instrumental play category that started out with no mention of RP. Posters, for example, asked after the situation on the SWC realm concerning raiding or PvP issues without mentioning RP got replies not only from posters answering their questions, but also from role-players emphasizing that SWC is a RP realm and inquiring about the original poster's intention to role-play. On several occasions this lead to discussions about RP versus non-RP play style on the realm. The non-RP players mention that players can also do other things than RP, while the role-players argue that SWC is a RP realm and that there is an incredible lack of role-players and willingness to RP. The role-players of SWC are frustrated by the great amount of non-RPers on the realm and the general lack of role-play. Role-players also have a lot of problems with other players disturbing immersion and intentionally disrupting their play. The RP event announcements on the forum generally request non-RPers to respect that there are people that do want to role-play even if you yourself might not. In threads discussing RP events that have taken place remarks about some players that intentionally tried to disrupt the event and role-play are common. Some returning RP events even get moved to other areas because of the continuing harassment and disruption of the role-play caused intentionally by other players.

Even though the role-players try to stimulate and emphasize that Steamwheedle Cartel is a RP realm, it was mainly in the subcategories *character development, LFG* and *character migration* where role-players emphasized the aspect of RP on the realm. Threads in the player category or subcategories *raid recruitment, gameplay, TBC, technical, realm* and *Blizzard* generally did not get replies from role-players emphasizing RP. So, non-RP threads that are considered beneficial for the community are accepted by role-players on the SWC forum, but more individual instrumental play oriented threads are not welcomed on the forum.

Instrumental play category
Even though role-play topics dominate the forum space, the category instrumental play contains a reasonable amount of threads as well (109). These threads however were usually shorter and on average had less replies than threads of the role-play category. Since Blizzard provides many different forums certain topics, such as class specific issues and technical issues are generally not discussed on the SWC forum. When a player does start a thread about, for example a technical problem a reply often states it would be better to post on the technical forum. The SWC forum is mainly concerned with issues concerning the SWC community, especially role-play issues. Instrumental play discussions take place on the forum

as well, but when these involve discussions which are not necessarily beneficial for the community role-players will comment upon them.

Player category

The most popular threads of the forum are the *forum games*, which can be found in the player category (42 threads). The *forum games* got replies every day from several different players and once a forum game reaches the maximum of 500 replies a new thread is opened where the game is continued. The 'how famous is the person above you?', 'rumor has it…' and ^<v game were most popular. However, the posters in these threads were often limited to the same players who responded daily, and sometimes even several times a day. The *greetings* subcategory has most threads within the player category. This is partly due to the period of time in which the data was collected. Ten out of fifteen *greetings* threads were threads in which players wished each other a Happy Christmas and/or Happy New Year. Of the five remaining threads one was concerned with the one-year anniversary of the realm and the other 4 were threads where players who are new to the realm say 'hello' to the realm. The player category holds threads that are still linked to WoW, but the topics are less clearly linked than those in role-play and instrumental play. The players play with the game in the form of other games, or for example in the form of fan art.

Topics and time of research

That the time of reading the forum is important for the threads and topics discussed is not only exemplified by seasonal greetings, but also by the threads concerning the TBC expansion. If there would not have been an expansion coming those threads would not have existed. Furthermore, the release of the expansion had an impact on the game which is also reflected in the forum. As has been shown the SWC forum is a dominated RP space, after the release of TBC, however the amount of threads concerning RP declined and those concerned with instrumental play increased. From certain discussion threads it became clear that the expansion had disrupted the RP community. Many players wanted to try out role-play with the new races and explore the new content of the game and new role-play communities were established. So the time of research is important for the data that has been found. The two most visible and prominent influences upon the collected data for this research are the season, Christmas and New Year's, and the release of *The Burning Crusade* expansion for the game.

Stickies

The 'sticky' threads on the forum have been mentioned separately in the overview (figure 1) because these threads will always appear on top of the forum. Every forum has a stickied message on top of the forum where Blizzard states the forum rules. The rest of the stickies are proposed by the players themselves to become sticky and thus reflect what players find important for the community. *Realm* stickies give overviews of the realm's guilds and communities, as well as the addresses of the SWC wiki page and mIRC channel. The *character development* threads are concerned with an overview of historic events of the realm, which also includes important RP events, and the realm crafter list. Besides these more instrumental threads concerning the realm the rest of the stickied threads *-RP mechanical*, *RP recruitment* and *fan art-* are concerned with role-play. Half of the stickied threads is thus concerned with instrumental play while the other half is concerned with RP. Guild lists, realm crafter lists, and historical events lists can be found on any realm forum. Similarly, RP guides can usually be found on RP realm forums as stickies. The presence of the RP related stickies shows that SWC is a role-play realm.

Conclusions

Forums are important for a community feeling and for the possibility of communication between players. Because of their importance for in-game developments, because in-game developments are continued on forums and because of topics that are linked to the game but not necessarily game related, such as forum games, forums question clear boundaries of games. The Steamwheedle Cartel forum is a community space where players communicate about game related issues, more specifically SWC community related issues. In general we can distinguish three main topics in the threads: role-play, instrumental play and player issues. While the content of the threads seem to indicate that role-players are a minority in-game, the SWC forum is a dominated RP space, where both 'in character' developments and 'out of character' discussions and organization takes place to accommodate for in-game activities and developments. The role-play dimension of this research also questions clear boundaries, since role-play in game definitions is seen as a borderline case. Instrumental play issues are discussed on the SWC forum as well, but individual issues seem not to be accepted by the role-players while instrumental play threads discussing issues for the whole SWC community seem accepted. The player category shows that not all communication and activity on the forum is meant for enhancement of in-game activities, but can also be an end in itself. In light of the collected data the time of research is important for its findings. Topics discussed are

related to seasonal times and game developments, such as the release of an expansion. The content of the threads will be discussed more elaborately in the following chapter where the way the posters construct, relate to and use the term 'real life' is analysed.

3. Players, a game, and a 'real life'

> ((Sorry I couldnt be there Armos, RL is a pain in the ass))
> ("Dead Man's Funeral" thread)
>
> Sorry.. >_< Due to Some RL stuff cropping up (always the way eh?) We cant press forward with the event tonight..So it will postponed until a later date (probably next week).
> I am really really sorry guys :(
> ("Cross Faction Event (RP) The Gadgetzan Fete!!" thread)
>
> I can not attend for a few weeks (which grieves me quite much..) for I am otherwise engaged in real-life for the coming thursdays.
> ("Theramore Experience-Regular Casual RP event" thread)[23]

These quotes are taken from the data collected from the Steamwheedle Cartel forum. In the posts the players apologize for not being able to attend a RP event due to 'real life', in the second post the poster is in fact the organizer of the event and thus the whole event will not take place. In chapter two we have seen that the Steamwheedle Cartel forum is a dominated role-play space where players discuss game related issues. In this chapter the threads that have been collected from the forum will be used for a further analysis of the way in which players construct, use and talk about 'real life'. The close reading of the threads will address *how* players refer to RL; *when* players use certain concepts; and *what* connotations different concepts hold. We will see that 'real life' and similar concepts are ambiguous and shift meaning dependent upon their context. When used in contrast to the game world these concepts often hold more serious and negative connotations, on the other hand they may hold positive connotations since they are always regarded as more valuable and more important than the game and the game world.

The term 'real life' is not only used by players of MMORPGs. A quick search on the Internet shows that 'real life' is a term with many meanings and is used in reference to diseases and disabilities; hardships of life; ordinary people's life; natural life styles; churches; as a name for companies; and the Internet. According to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which is collaboratively written by its readers and thus reflects a sort of collective viewpoint, 'real life' "is most often used to mean life outside of an environment that is generally seen as fiction or fantasy, such as something on the Internet, virtual reality, a dream, a novel, a movie, a hallucination, or a delusion."[24] 'Real life' in this sense indicates a non-fictional and physical reality. The term is also used synonymously at times with 'real world', which refers to the practical world after schooling. Furthermore, 'real life' is used as a normative term to refer to

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[23] Character and guild names have not been altered, because the data presented in this thesis is publicly available and because character and guild names carry an important representation value.

[24] Wikipedia, the free encyclopdia, "Real Life" - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real_life (accessed June 24, 2007).

more productive, serious, and hence more valuable activities in contrast to recreational activities, this especially in relation to playing video games and surfing the Internet. The abbreviations RL, 'real life', and IRL, 'in real life', are generally used in relation to the Internet and indicate the non-virtual, physical world (Bell et al. 2004).[25]

As explained in chapter two in order to analyse the way players describe their relation to 'real life' and *World of Warcraft* I took threads from the Steamwheedle Cartel forum. References to RL, explicitly or implicitly, seem to occur in every category. Over the 45-days period of reading the forum I took 23% of all threads. Of the threads taken from the forum respectively 18% to 28% come from the *role-play*, *instrumental* and *player* categories (see figure 2.0). This shows that players do not mention RL only in specific categories. When we look at the subcategories we see some exceptions, from the *game mechanics, technical,* and *greetings* less then 10% of the threads refer to RL. The *LFP* threads has a percentage of 100, but this category only consists of two threads. In general, players mention 'real life' or aspects of RL in almost 25% of the threads.

Analysing the ways in which players use 'real life' and the meanings players ascribe to RL and similar concepts a certain ambivalence seems at play. On the one hand I want to analyse what players refer to when they refer to RL, on the other hand I am looking for similar concepts and want to know when and how players refer to 'real life' aspects and issues. So in order to find threads in which similar concepts or meanings are attributed a general idea of what is meant by RL has to be in place. 'Real life' is a normalized term used in different situations and in general people will understand what it refers to. However, the exact meaning of RL is ambiguous. 'Real life' can refer to (1) a setting outside the fantasy or fictional setting; (2) real world, the life beyond learning from books; (3) 'productive' activities, such as work or taking care of the family; (4) not on the Internet; (5) outside the virtual setting.[26] So, issues that are inconsistent with the game world, such as work, school or offline activities could be considered located in 'real life' and therefore I have looked at these issues in the threads as well and tried to see if the players consider these issues RL. In order to find similar concepts all the threads which referred explicitly to RL have been taken from the forum. Terms such as 'personal life' and 'real world' are sometimes used as interchangeable

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[25] MUD dictionary, "Encyclopedia of MUDs Dictionary," http://www.iowa-mug.net/muddic/dic/academic.html (accessed June 24, 2007).
MUSE Ltd., "Mudspeke Index," http://www.mud.co.uk/muse/muse/msindex.htm (accessed June 24, 2007).
Wikipedia, the free encyclopdia, "Real Life" - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real_life (accessed June 24, 2007).
[26] Ibid.

with real life' by players. These concepts addressed similar issues as the explicitly mentioned RL and can thus be considered similar, not necessarily synonym, to RL.

Category	Sub-category	Total	I took	% Posts taken of category
Role-play				
	RP event	31	11	35%
	RP story	46	11	24%
	RP recruitment	23	5	22%
	RP mechanical	18	6	33%
	TBC RP	6	2	33%
Total Role-play		**124**	**35**	**28%**
Instrumental				
	Character development	10	2	20%
	Raid recruitment	15	3	20%
	Game mechanics	25	2	8%
	TBC	9	3	33%
	LFG	16	3	19%
	Character migration	7	2	28%
	Technical	14	1	7%
	Realm	9	3	33%
	Blizzard	4	1	25%
Total Instrumental		**109**	**20**	**18%**
Player				
	Forum game	7	2	28%
	LFP	2	2	100%
	Specified message	9	2	22%
	Greetings	15	1	6%
	Fan art	9	2	22%
Total Player		**42**	**9**	**21%**
Total		**275**	**64**	**23%**

Figure 2.0 Percentages of threads taken for further analysis.

While the terms RL (or real life, Real Life) and IRL (in real-life, in Real-Life) are used commonly amongst players, the concepts themselves are never discussed. Just mentioning RL is a justified explanation for, for example absence from the game. Other terms that are used similarly and frequently by players are personal life, life, work, personal concerns, personal issues and personal matters. Sometimes these terms are used synonymously to RL. Whether or not something is considered part of RL is not always made explicit, certain players use references to work, school or personal issues whereas other players use RL. It could be that these issues are already assumed to be part of RL and therefore there is no need to explicitly state RL in reference to them.

'Real life' is a contextual concept, but is generally used as part of a binary distinction, often as the opposite of something 'not-real'. One of the problems with the use of 'real' is that it means something that exists and is not imagined, the physical reality. Yet, at the same time 'real' can also be used to refer to experiences; something is real because it was experienced (Markham 1998; Collins Cobuild English Dictionary 2001, 1277). As mentioned in chapter one the use of concepts which include 'real' in contrast to virtual (gaming) worlds reinforce separateness and can imply that online experiences are not 'real'. Furthermore, 'real' is often privileged above the not 'real', or virtual (Bell et al. 2004; Wertheim 1999).

This chapter now continues to look specifically at the ways in which players refer to RL and RL issues. Discussing issues such as dedication, player behaviour, relationships, time management, role-play and the game world we will see that discussing the way in which players use and describe RL is closely related to issues of consistency, immersion, the relation between player and game, and (unclear) boundaries between the game world and the 'real world'.

Players multiple use of 'real life'

Reading the data collected from the forum, three interrelated categories in which 'real life' is used can be distinguished. First, a general category concerning the many ways in which players in general make use of the concept 'real life'. The second category is role-play. Role-players of course also use 'real life' in the ways players in general construct the concept, but role-play adds an extra dimension. Role-play's aim to construct an immersive fantasy world and its specific references to 'in character' and 'out of character' behaviour add more ways in which players relate to 'real life'. The last category is in fact not how players use the concept but the way in which Blizzard presents WoW in contrast to 'real life'. These categories interrelate and are not clearly separated, but in general do address different aspects of players relation to the concept 'real life'.

"Sorry I cannot play, RL!" RL as an excuse

As the quotes at the beginning of this chapter show, 'real life' is used by players as an explanation or excuse of why they cannot play (as much). By far most references to 'real life' are made in reference to absence from the game, as an explanation why the player cannot be online.

> It grieves me greatly that I missed this event. I wow to be present at a future meeting. ((not next Sunday though, IRL issues))
> ("Followers of Elune – RP Event" thread)

> Personally I can't play the game that much cause of IRL issues.
> ("Server First Level 70" thread)

Players often apologize for their absence and RL is mostly seen as something that keeps the player from playing the game, away from fun. 'Real life' in this sense is serious and opposed to play, and is referred to as something negative, a "pain in the ass". 'Real life' is that which can mess up the player's plans to go online and play the game, it disrupts playing the game. An example of the use of RL in this way is:

> (([…] As for the debate on Saturday, I will try to be there, unless RL takes over my plans, or I will be murdered in-game ;)))
> ("Protect the Horde! ((a crazy idea))" thread)

While RL in itself can be an explanation of why players cannot play, posters also frequently mention school or work, or RL responsibilities as reasons why they cannot play. If work and school are located in 'real life' these remarks refer to RL and they are certainly referring to offline life. 'Real life', work and school have to do with the game because it influences when and how much players can play the game, hence they are used as explanations for player's playing time. A post concerning a guild that disbanded explains that the guild's leaders started university and hence could not continue the guild any longer. Several posters refer to the beginning of college or university as not being able to be online as much as they used to be, due to less time and/or lack of Internet access.

> Things were fine for a month or so before the new guild leaders left the game due to more RL issues (they were joining university).
> ("Raiding groups of Steamwheedle Cartel" thread)

> ((sorry I missed it, I had to go to school open day […]))
> ("B.E Integration Public Debate – RP Event" thread)

Many posters that seem to work or go to school remark on the fact that they have to get sleep at night. These players usually have to get up early in the morning and often have had to leave early from events or cannot participate at all in events or raids that take place in the evening. Remarks to work are not only made in reference to unavailability to play but also to explain for example the delay of fan art magazine issues. In December for example a poster asked why issues of different fan art magazines had not appeared yet and responses were:

> The Scarlet News will resume in January or shortly after. December is a very busy month for us working people :)

> Same goes for the Oracle. Busy at work at with Xmas, should be ready in Jan.
> (quotes from "Newspapers" thread)

As mentioned before terms such as personal life, life, and personal issues are also used as explanations for absence of the game and may be read as interchangeable with RL. Examples of these are posts where players mention their personal life as a reason why they cannot play:

> Regrettably due to personal concerns I have had less time on game than I'd have preferred over the past couple of weeks.
> From next week I am not going to be around very much due to RL work related issues.
> ("Horde Council" thread)
>
> Sorry guys, event is temporarily on hold. Personal issues have arose and I'm leaving WoW for a bit.
> ("From the Darkness they come… ((Realm Event))" thread)

In replies to such posts fellow players wish the poster good luck with the "personal things" "good luck with RL" or " the best with IRL". The personal is thus 'real life'. Whereas some players refer to a more general RL, other players explain to various degrees more explicitly what it is that keeps them from playing, for example work or school. Personal issues, no connection to the Internet or family members that have confiscated the computer are also used as explanations of not being able to play. School, work, the possibility to go online into the game, or a player's personal situation seem located in 'real life' since in one post a player may refer to any of these and in replies posters name the same matter RL. Since 'real life' is that which does not allow the player to come online, the explanations players give for their absence of playing seem to be located in 'real life'.

'Real life' thus can be used as a self-evident explanation and valid excuse. It is a broad term that can refer to almost any kind of reason why people cannot play. As an excuse or explanation 'real life' holds a negative connotation as it is that which keeps the player away from playing. 'Real life' thus is separated from the game and is in fact that which prevents play. However, 'real life' at the same time seems to be considered more important as the game since 'real life' itself is a valid and unquestioned excuse.

Dedication, requirements and 'real life'

Guilds and guild recruitment posts often refer directly or indirectly to 'real life'. Especially in guild requirements lists for (new) members this becomes clear. Guild requirements refer to in-game aspects of the character, such as a minimum level or a specific class, and also to aspects of the player which can be linked to the in-game environment, such as knowing how to play one's class, or requirements which can be located on the boundary of in-game and out-of-game, or in RL. Requirements can state a minimum amount of gaming time; specific days that a player has to be online; a certain involvement such as for example being active on forums; and almost always a certain player style or behaviour. Although in specific role-play guilds

certain behaviour requirements might apply to the character; player behaviour for any kind of guild is almost always required to be mature -certain guilds have a minimum age level- and often honest and friendly. So one can have a childish and unfair character to play, but the player himself or herself has to be mature in behaviour and attitude. Posts concerning raids and raiding groups often require a minimum amount of game time and a certain dedication towards the game. An example of requirements of a raiding guild are:

> We are looking for people that:
> - Are lvl 60
> - Are available to attend at least two of our weekly raids from 19:30 – 24:00 on Monday, Thursday or Sunday.
> - You are mature and have an mature attitude, You are NOT loot hungry and do raiding for seeing new things and teamplay. The epics are just a nice reward.
> - You know how to play your class and you are a good listener.
> - You also are active outside the game on forums and read tactics before raiding, as your not scared by farming for mats for potions and other needed things for raiding.
> ("Temporis Raiders are recruiting." thread)[27]

Sometimes guilds qualify themselves against such requirements by stating that they acknowledge that players have a life, or a 'real life'. For example as one guild writes in their recruitment thread:

> Although we are an active guild with ambitions we ask from our members the understanding that RL can always rear its ugly head, so playing time and availability may vary. This however also means that we do not ask of our members to be online at certain hours or a minimum per week.
> ("<Bending Destiny> is recruiting" thread)

This guild acknowledges players have a real life and thus does not require a minimum play time. The amount of time played by players in this sense is located and related to a player's 'real life'. RL again refers to something located out-of-game which prevents a player from playing.

Not only the amount of time players play, but also the specific time players can be online is related to players' offline life. Players can organize their daily lives in order to be able to be online at specific times in line with the community in which the player resonates. A player's offline life –family life, work, school or college- has influence on his or her playing time. A thread concerning the making of a "raiding community for those with bad timing" shows that requirements concerning times and days have a very specific and strong relation to players offline lives and their RL obligations. The posters want to create a raid community for those players that do not live in the same time zone as the realm. Usually, raids on Steamwheedle Cartel start around 19.00 or 20.00 realm time and last up to several hours. Due

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[27] Loot is the rewards from killing computer controlled characters in the game.
Epics are high valued in-game armour and weapons.
Farming refers to the practice of repeatedly killing computer controlled characters in order to get money or materials.

to the time difference these players cannot join raids because they either should not sleep at night or would have to skip work or school in order to raid. So they want to set up a raid community for those players for which the raiding times of most raiding communities and guilds on the realm are incompatible with their time zone. They want to "sleep nights, raid days". Of course, not only time zones make time requirements inconvenient for players, even though a player might be in the same time zone his or her working hours, for example, could be incompatible with the 'normal' raiding times. The fact that players remark upon their work, school and other RL obligations in regard to playing time shows that play time has a close relation to RL. Players' offline lives and their online gaming time are closely related and influence each other. 'Real life', thus, is related to when and how much players play the game.

The impact that requirements such as in game time and dedication of many raiding guilds have is frequently commented on by players that do not raid (often). Not always is this due to the fact that they do not want to raid, some players state they would be able to raid if they did not have to go to school or work, so they would be able to raid. Some go as far as to say that only those who do not have a life can raid, or that in order to be able to raid one has to have no RL. Here again reference to RL is related to time played. The notion that raiding demands too much time is held by many more casual players, role-players, and players that just do not consider themselves 'hardcore'. A somewhat ironic expressed example of this view is posted by one of the active RP players and 'main posters' on the SWC forum:

> My view of a pure, hardcore raiding guild has been formed and coloured via reading comments on other message boards. The general (stereotyped) perception given seems to be:
>
> All members are expected to spec their character in the manner dictated by the guild.
> All members are expected to be AT LEAST Tier 1 as minimum standard.
> All members must be able to commit to raiding at least five days per week, no time off, no excuses! The remaining time must be spent grinding for pots, mats etc.
> No hunters - ever! - no exceptions.
> No DPS focussed Paladins, 'Healadins' only (who will be given an extended trial period, one foul-up and they are out on their ass),
> All members will need a standard 'float' of minimum 15,000 gold in the bank at all times in order to cover the typical cost of regular raiding.
>
> I guess much of the above is no really true in reality, at least I hope not? Cos that aint a game, that's a job :D
> ("It's 'Orrible :(" thread)[28]

In this quote the player exaggerates the impression she got from the raiding requirements that many raiding communities and guilds demand. She compares the play style of raiders with a

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[28] Spec refers to a certain way in which players can divide points in order to improve their character's abilities. Tier 1 refers to a special set of armour.
Grinding is the practice of "Staying in the same area fighting the same types of monsters for a very long time." (Blizzard 2004).
DPS is an acronym for Damage Per Second.

job, instead of a game. Many threads on the Steamwheedle Cartel forum mention play style and players comment on different play styles. How players use concepts such as 'real life' to comment on play styles we will see in the next section.

"Get yourself a RL!" Play styles

That dedication to the game and play time are linked to 'real life' perceptions is illustrated very well by discussions around 'firsts'. 'Firsts' are players who reach a certain level or accomplish a certain (difficult) goal first within the community. This can be the whole WoW community, but generally realms also have their 'firsts'. Discussions on 'firsts' in comparison to other threads get more replies. Especially discussions concerned with the first level 70 character after *The Burning Crusade* expansion show time spend in the game is linked to the notion of having, or not having a 'real life'.[29]

On the WoW European realms the first level 70 is a French player who levelled his character to level 70 within 28 hours after the release of TBC expansion. On the Steamwheedle Cartel forum there is a thread "Ding first 61?" about the first player on SWC who reached level 61. The replies to this post range from congratulations to

> That's so worth bragging about, L2RL [learn to real life], kk
> ("Ding first 61?" thread)

'Firsts' get mixed responses and the discussion generated by the first level 70 illustrates this. The discussion generated by the original post reporting about the first level 70 player and a small interview with the player takes place on another non-WoW forum. In the last post of the "Ding first to 61?" thread on the SWC forum there is a link to this other forum accompanied by the comment:

> So what someone got 70 in 28 hours.
> ("Ding first 61?" thread)

The forum to which the link leads and where the discussion concerning the first level 70 player takes place focuses on raids and is not part of SWC. There are however similarities between the discussion and responses on the SWC forum to play style and 'firsts'. The discussion on the raid forum exemplifies explicitly the attitude of different players towards

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[29] Before *The Burning Crusade* expansion players could reach a maximum level of 60. After the expansion the level maximum was 70. The average in-game time it takes to level a character from level 1 to 60 is 20.3 played days (487.2 hours) (PlayOn - http://blogs.parc.com/playon/) and from level 60 to level 70 was going to take a similar amount of time. However, there are always players that try to reach the maximum level in a minimum amount of time and some aim specifically to be the very 'first'.

'firsts' and different play styles which can also be found on the SWC forum, although on the SWC forum this is worded less aggressive and somewhat more diplomatic.

Basically discussions after 'first' posts can be divided into two camps that will reply after the original post: the 'haters' and the 'admirers'. The first group replies with statements that the 'first' player has no life, needs to get a real life, is pathetic, insane, and has missed out on all the content. These posters will not congratulate someone who is crazy and without a life. Two examples of these kind of responses taken from the raid forum discussion on the first level 70 are:

> Few words to say
> 1 – Loser
> 2 – Get a life
> 3 – Get laid
> 4 – Get a life
> 5 – R-tard
> Not really anything to congratulate about, I mean, basically he is saying "Look at me, I dont have any friends, no girlfriend no life, and I dont got anything better to do so I rushed to 70, skipping all the new content!"
> Idiot :S
>
> Congratulations for someone who has no live?No, thanks!!
> Do you want a pin or something for this? IT'S ONLY A GAME!!!
> (quotes from "First lvl 70: interview with him" thread on worldofraids.com)

The second group of posters generally defends the effort and accomplishment of the 'first' player. These posters counter argue the 'haters' and congratulate the 'first' player. They admire the dedication, effort and work that was involved into reaching the goal that the 'first' player has reached. Interestingly, while the 'haters' accuse the 'first' player of having no (real) life, the 'admirers' argue that the 'haters' do not have a life because they spend much more time playing in order to reach the same state as the 'first' player.

> I'm not sure who's the most "nolife", the one who takes one day off to level all the way from 60 to 70 or the guys who play 5 hours every night for a month to do the same…
>
> i think congratulations are in order .since this has been a guild event, a well coordinated guild event these gratz are for them as well ☺now for all the haters that think he doesn't have a life think how much time u spend on levelling.. that's the nolifer right there idiots…ignorants and haters ftw
>
> Step 1: Get a day off from work the day BC launches.
> Step 2: Play until you can't play no more.
> I played the game for 17 hours strait from the moment I installed it so I can see 28 hours not being that hard to do. And he was probably on vent or TS with his guildies so I just don't see where hanging out with your buddies for 26 hours strait equals having no life. The lives of people who spent 7-8 hours a day SEVEN days a week learning Naxx [a specific instance in WoW] may be questionable, but spending just over ONE day getting to 70, that's fuckin' epic.
> (quotes from "First lvl 70: interview with him" thread on worldofraids.com)

In these kind of discussions 'real life' comments are made in relation to dedication to the game and time spend in the game. 'Real life' is more important and more serious than the game and spending much time in the game means that you have no 'real life'. The game is not considered part of this 'real life' but rather life outside the game or maybe beside the game,

something people turn to when they lack a RL. RL is also something people can lose because of the time they played in the game. Much time to play equals having no life. The importance of reaching 'first' goals is remarked upon often, by both the 'haters' as well as the 'admirers'. While the 'haters' remark that if they had no life and had time they would be able to do the same, the 'admirers' claim that just because someone plans something well and follows it through does not necessarily mean they have no life besides the game. While the discussions on the SWC are less aggressive than the discussion on the raid forum, the basic argument is the same. On the SWC forum the 'haters' posters generally do not attack the 'first' player's self, but they do refer to the time issue:

> you know , the ones who dont work and such, or those ones who play 24/7 get lvl 70 first.
> its not about questing and such, if you have time you ding faster.
> ("Ding first 61?" thread)[30]

> I am not angry nor jealous. But I'm not impressed either. If I had enough time to play all day and night, and good gear, and friends to help me, etc etc…Okay, maybe some skill was required to make it, but still, I don't understand *why* would anyone want to do it. You get no reward for being the server first 70, do you.
> That's why I will not congratulate, just as I would not congratulate if someone, say, stand on a railroad and avoid being hit by train thanks to his incredible skill, because the whole thing is just stupid.
> ("Server First Level 70!" thread, emphasis in original post)

Discussions about whether or not a player has a life, or needs to get a RL on the SWC forum can also be found in other 'first' threads and in threads concerning PvP. As mentioned before the SWC forum is a dominated RP space and often when issues concerning another play style are mentioned a discussion about play styles emerges. Generally it is power levellers, or PvP style versus a more casual play style or role-play. Both groups accuse each other of not having a life. A poster from a PvP realm, Twisted Nether, replies in a thread where SWC players discuss the new content and progress after TBC expansion:

> OMFG! You say oh people are even level 63 wtf noob get a life people are level 70 already on twisted nether steemwheedle sucks
> ("Who else is finding tbc easy?" thread)[31]

The SWC players however seem not impressed and state:

> Shoo, shoo, back to your own realm vile troll!

> Yes, but we have a life.
> (quotes from "Who else is finding tbc easy?" thread)

This thread not only shows the community feeling of SWC but also a difference in play style. Interestingly, the more casual players seem to say to more dedicated players to get a life and that the game is just a game. At the same time more dedicated players consider the more

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[30] Ding is a term used by players to indicate that they have gained a level.
[31] A Noob is a beginner.

casual gamers 'noobs' and tell them to get a life. Casual players will never do anything original or be good at playing the game according to these more dedicated players, so they should go do something else and get a life. Play style and time management are thus strongly connected with the notion of having a life or RL. Players tell each other to get a RL when it is thought too much time is spend to and in the game. It is not necessarily the play style that is attacked, but rather the time spend in the game or the dedication to the game.

In these discussions 'life' and 'real life' seem to refer to the same concept. It seems that to game is not a life, it is not part of 'real life'. Players seem to have a strong desire to make clear that they do have a life besides the game. RL is more important because the game is just a game. The time spend and dedicated to the game seem to indicate how serious you take the game, hence if it is considered that you dedicate too much time to the game you have no RL. 'Real life' thus is out of the game. The game is not part of 'real life', it is separated and subordinated to RL.

"Sort out your RL then play!" Play behaviour

The distinction and separation made between game world and RL is contrasted by the way players talk about player behaviour. The "get a RL" argument is also used to indicate to specific undesired game behaviour. As we have seen in the dedication part, mature friendly and honest behaviour are sometimes required in order to join a guild. In posts concerning undesired behaviour and complaints about players' in-game or forum behaviour, the attitude and behaviour is often ascribed to players RL personality.[32] Complaints for example about players' play styles such as griefing are commented upon with references to how these players are IRL. [33] Their personalities and state of mind out of the game cause their unwanted in-game behaviour.

> Bullies are the same wherever you go.
> They pick on those weaker than themselves to boost their twisted little egos and to make up for the vast array of inadequacies that they have in their lives.
> […]
> In summary, Alliance bullies go sort you RL problems out and stop picking on newbies or face the wrath f the Horde!
> ("Cowardly carnage at the Crossroads" thread)[34]

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[32] While this thesis is not concerned with gender specific issues, noticeable was that whenever unwanted gaming behaviour was discussed the unidentified player was automatically referred to as being male.

[33] "A griefer is a slang term used to describe a player in an online video game who plays the game simply to cause grief to other players through harassment." Wikipedia, the free encyclopdia, "Griefer", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griefing (accessed June 24, 2007).

[34] The Alliance and Horde are the two factions which in the *World of Warcraft* are at war with one another.

The explanation for in-game behaviour is thus located in 'real life'. This we see not only in griefing, but in most kind of play styles. For example lolboys or lolbois, half naked erotic dancing characters or 'l33t' talking players, are referred to as kids, implying that these players act the way they do because of their assumed young age or childish behaviour.[35] But not only negative behaviour is explained by the RL player. Players refer to their age and gaming experience or lack thereof as explanations for their in-game and forum behaviour.

> Don't mind my writing style too much people, I'm only sixteen (and a half! :P).
> ("Don't Just RP in goldshire!!!" thread)

> I appreciate that you are not as old as some of the more mature players on this realm, and that sometimes shows, as does the attitude from the some of us mature players to the younger people here. *This is different from the experienced vs noob players that is another issue*.
> ("I need an honest opinon." thread, emphasis in orginal post)

Furthermore, events that happen to the player may also explain the behaviour exhibited, such as drunkenness or moods:

> Sorry, I was probably slightly tipsy yesterday
> ("I need an honest opinon." thread)

> hope you didn't take my teasing to heart hehe I was in a strange mood that night
> ("I need an honest opinon." thread)

> I'm sorry. My heart is just not in it this evening. I hope that others turn up all the same.
> ("This Thursday: Theramore Experience – Week 10" thread)

Player behaviour is explained by RL situations and personalities. Players that feel they have displayed incorrect or shameful behaviour apologize for their behaviour and often refer to their RL situation as an explanation. In other cases RL might be seen as an explanation in itself, such as IRL issues as a reason why a player is not able to come online. But when players do feel the need to explain their behaviour it is exactly this 'real life' that they explain. For example by referring to their age or their state of mind. One of the frequent role-play posters is very explicit and lengthy about her 'real life' and in a thread where she pointed out that SWC is a RP realm repliers said she did not need to be that aggressive. She apologized deeply and explained:

> I honestly did not realise I was being aggressive. If you knew me in real life, you would find me very different, as I do not have an aggressive bone in my body. I absolutely loathe conflict, and I am very,

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[35] Lolboys or lolbois are terms used to refer to players that do not behave 'in character' or in line with the fictional world of *World of Warcraft* and are very prominent by for example making their characters jump around a lot, go around towns as naked as possible and use abbreviations and language that is not in line with the fictional world, such as 'lol' (laughing out loud).
'L33t' refers to "Leet (written as 31337, 1337, and l33t), or Leetspeak, is a written form of slang used primarily on the Internet, but becoming increasingly common in many online video games, which uses various combinations of alphanumerics to replace proper letters. The term itself is a degenerative form of the word "elite"." Wikipedia, the free encyclopdia, "Leet", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leet (accessed June 24, 2007).

very shy, lack confidence, self -conscious and still recovering from a childhood of abuse and serial bullying; which has helped mould my personality, and world-view to the extent of it often shaping my actions and responses - sometimes making me act in a very stupid, thoughtless and immature manner. Often the harder I try to avoid doing stupid things, and saying stupid things, the worse I make the situation.

Once again I seem to have started something with a particular intention, and achieved something not intended. My personal life has been absolute pure, undiluted hell over the last couple of weeks due to grim health issues affecting a loved one, and various other concerns and bits of appalling luck that I will not bore anyone with. It is very hard for me to think coherently right now, but I am desperately unhappy. Wow is my main escape from all the above, and I don't want it to end.

This is not an excuse, as I realise now that I acted wrongly. But simply an apology, and a hope that the ones reading this post will one day find it in their hearts to forgive my idiocy.

There have been too many apologies from me as of late, and too many dumb excuses and lenghthy explanations. Therefore I will remain silent in future.

I have a stupid big mouth, and my own clumsyness is often the bane of my existance. I will keep this stupid, big mouth shut for the common good.
("looking for good premade PvP guild/group" thread)

Replies to this post say that the player in question should deal with RL or IRL issues, for example:

Deal with the stuff in your life that you need to (that's the stuff that matters after all) and come back and enjoy WoW with he rest of us for the great fun and escapism that it represents.
("looking for good premade PvP guild/group" thread)

So in relation to in-game and forum behaviour 'real life' is closely linked to the game and not clearly separated. The in-game behaviour and out-of-game state of the player are related, if not the same. RL in this sense refers to the player as a person who seems to be located in 'real life'.

But not only negative behaviour is explained by the 'real life' situation of players. Play behaviour that is appreciated often results in players believing that the player of the character is a good person IRL. Players, especially role-players, who play less pleasant characters often explain their behaviour and make a clear distinction between the character and the player. That player behaviour is strongly related to the in game state of affairs is exemplified also by a guild leader of an RP guild explaining that he wanted to name his guild 'Circle of Nobility' not because of role-play reasons, but because he felt the players, role-players, themselves are noble and he wanted to reward them.

These people are 'noble' in real life, is what i think, because they follow the rules in grace and are, to be put simply, 'good folks!'. And because they're noble in real life, I thought that perhaps their characters should be given the title of 'nobles', because they deserve it. It's a way of praising them and making them feel they are good people, whom they are.
("Don't Just RP in goldshire!!!" thread)

So on the one hand, when discussing play styles such as 'firsts' 'real life' is used as a different situation isolated from the game. 'Real life' is more important and distinct from the game, and when players play too much they have no 'real life'. However, when player behaviour is

discussed 'real life' and the game seem to be linked as the player and his or her behaviour and personality are located IRL. The offline IRL circumstances and personality of players are used as explanations for their in-game behaviour. 'Real life' thus becomes an excuse for what happens in the game. In this sense RL still seems located as that which is not located in the game, but RL is closely linked and transfers into the game.

Real relations

So far we have seen that 'real life' has been used to refer to behavioural and time management in relation to the game. RL has been used as that-which-occurs-offline. That the concept is used to refer to the physical offline world is also exemplified by the way players refer to RL and other persons. When players refer to friends and family RL is sometimes added, which seemingly refers to those relations as existing before and/or outside of the context of the game.

> A small and friendly guild mainly consisting of RL friends and a few new ones ;)
> ("The Guilds of Steamwheedle Cartel" thread)
>
> The only reason I came in this server is because of my IRL friends.
> ("I need an honest opinon." thread)
>
> Small friendly guild of mainly (but not exclusively) real life friends.
> ("The Guilds of Steamwheedle Cartel" thread)

Whether or not the relationships one can build in a game are considered real is not the discussion point here. But what is clear is that players feel a need to clarify whether or not a relationship takes place offline or not. For example in the following quote where RL is used to clarify that the brother relation is out-of-game, the clarification of such a relation between characters or players can be important for role-play. In this case the relation between the players is the relation that takes place in 'real life'.

> I am quite interesting in the lore of WoW, but not in the way near my brother, Illidor. (That's RL)
> ("Cenarion Expedition." thread)

Most often 'real life' references are used in order to point to friendships. Especially in migration issues RL friends are often used as an explanation for migration or for playing WoW in general. RL friends in this sense seems a legitimate reason to migrate. So, in a sense the RL relations are considered more important than those build online, because RL relation in itself is enough explanation. When the topic is partners, or couples RL or IRL is used to show that the players of two characters are a couple outside of the context of the game. For example in the thread "RP couples?" players refer to their characters being married, but also their marriage IRL.

> Bibor and Nyir are married, if you consider it to be a couple :)
> ((We are married IRL too ;)))
> ("RP couples?" thread)

When from the context of the post it is clear that players refer to partners outside of the game this is often not specifically mentioned as RL. When it might be unclear if a relation is online or offline RL is added for clarification. RL thus refers to physically, bodily knowing the other person, having met a person offline and not only online.

RL in this sense does not necessarily have to refer to an out-of-game start of the relationship. Players can become friends through the game or develop meaningful relationships in-game. Sometimes, for example, friends are mentioned as a migration reason but it is unclear from the context if these are only in-game friends.

> I followed some friends to these environs last February and have had few regrets.
> ("9th January – Happy Birthday SwC" thread)
>
> Hello, SWC, It seems that a few of my good buddies are moving back to AD, and I have made the decision to follow them.
> ("Farewell buddies!" thread)

RL refers to the offline and physical world, but in these references there is no mentioning if the relationships originate from RL or not. So not mentioning RL does not necessarily mean that a relation is less serious or meaningful. The two posts I read during my time of reading the forum concerning missing persons are players asking about other players that unexpectedly have not been online for some time.

> OOC: Greetings, as the above message says, Ruk, one of our guild leaders and friend has appeared to have gone missing.
> We know it's probably silly to even do this, but if anyone has any word of him, it would put our mind to ease.
> Even better would be for Ruk to leave a message, but we'll live in hope.
> ("Warlord currently missing…" thread)
>
> A good friend of mine is desperately missing the high priestess Calene.
> She has unexpectedly not been seen for several weeks.
> Any information would be gratefully recieved. Please in-game mail or whisper me or Saradok (me) if you do not wish to discuss this matter here.
> ("Missing persons search" thread)

These posts show that players are concerned for their fellow players and express hope that everything is alright with the player. In fact the posters ask if anyone has any information on whether everything is alright with the player in question and would like to be contacted. Players show concern for other players even though they apparently have no RL connection, because in that case they would most likely know why the player would not be online.

So, 'real life' does not refer to the seriousness or realness of a relation, but only to the fact whether or not offline, in the physical world, people are related in some way as well. In

relation to relationships 'real life' refers to the physical world, the 'real world' and is used to clarify where relations between players take place.

A 'real world' and a game world

'Real life' of course takes place in the 'real world' and looking at how 'real world' is used by players tells us something about 'real life' as well. RW is not commonly used on the Steamwheedle Cartel forum, but can be used as a substitute for RL. For example when referring to the birthday of a player players can write that the birthday takes place IRL or RW birthday. In a few cases RW refers to the 'real world', as in the world and society outside the virtual world. In these posts the virtual world is contrasted or compared to the 'real world'. In-game situations and actions for example are compared to 'real world' situations. In the discussion around 'firsts' the 'first' play style is compared to people who attempt to break records, for example speed limits and sound barriers, or come up with challenges for the Guiness Book of Records.

> Why do you think people try to be the first to do something at all – wouldn't life be dull if people didn't try. The Guiness Book of Records would be a hell of a lot thinner, no-one would have climbed Everest or walked across Antartica. The whole point is that people reach out and attempt something….virtual or otherwise.
> ("Server First Level 70!" thread)

In these kind of comparisons the virtual world is seen as a different, yet similar world to the 'real world'. In explaining in-game behaviour RW is used like RL. The 'real world' in a way serves as an explanation for the virtual world.

Although players themselves do not often refer to the concept 'real world', one interesting aspect is time. We have already seen that play time is closely linked to discussing 'real life', but exact day times and season times blur the supposed distinction between the game world and 'real life' or 'real world' even more. First of all, in-game time is the same as 'real world' time. Days are calculated in hours and minutes, the European WoW time is the same as the central European time. Dates are not necessarily mentioned in the virtual world itself, but whenever events, either organized by players or by Blizzard, occur the dates are consistent with RW dates. This might make game play and organization easier, but also means a continuation of RW into the game world.

That time blurs the boundary between worlds is especially clear in the case of festival seasons. Blizzard incorporated similar festivals and holidays as 'real world' festivals and holidays in WoW. For example around Valentines Day there is a 'Love is in the air' festival in WoW and around Midsummer there is a in-game 'Midsummer Fire Festival'. The two

holidays that occurred during the time of research are New Year, which is also celebrated in WoW as New Year on December 31st and January 1st, and Christmas which is celebrated as the 'Feast of Winter Veil' between December 15th and January 2nd in WoW. In the greetings threads players wished each other Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and also Merry Winter Veil. It is not always clear if the players direct these wishes to the other players, or if the characters direct wishes to other characters. Not only the festivity itself but the wishes related to it seem to be in the virtual as well as in the 'real world' at the same time.

Even though Blizzard has incorporated the Christmas holiday seasons and New Years in WoW these festivity days seem to be associated with 'real life' by players and remain located IRL.

> Afraid to say WoW is not my list of traditional Christmas activities.
> ("Winter Veil events." thread)
>
> Sorry, no can do. 24th I'll be carol singing with my eldest son and 25th... well, it's Christmas Day for goodness sake! I'll be eating mince pies and drinking bubbly. Oh, and celebrating my 34th year in the real world.
> ("Winter Veil events." thread)
>
> Actually you'll find a lot of people have IRL activities on New Years Eve.
> ("New years eve party." thread)

These quotes come from threads where a player asks other players to come and celebrate the holidays in-game, the replies show that the festivities for most players are linked to 'real life' and that most players consider RL to be more important than the game, especially on 'real world' holidays. The 'real world' for players is the world outside the virtual world, it is a separated but similar place. The separation however becomes blurred because 'real world' characteristics, such as daytime, dates and seasonal holidays, are transferred into the virtual world yet for players these are still linked to the 'real world'.[36]

Role-Play and 'real life'

So far, the concept 'real life' has been discussed in the way players more generally make use of it. An analysis based on all the threads collected, thus concerning role-play, instrumental and player issues (see figure 1). As we have seen Steamwheedle Cartel is a role-play realm, and the forum is a dominated RP space with some active RP posters. While the way players make use of 'real life' so far concerns both non-RP players and RP players, certain aspects are specifically characteristic for the way role-players make use of the concept 'real life' and these will be addressed here.

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[36] Interestingly, the western ideology and cultural background of these festivities and times are never questioned or remarked upon. Not all people for example celebrate Christmas.

'Real life' and 'out of character'

As mentioned previously role-players make a distinction between 'in character' (IC) and 'out of character' (OOC). 'In character' is linked to the imaginary character that the player plays and is thus linked to the virtual fantasy world. 'Out of character' is everything that does not stem from the imaginary character, this can range from discussions of in-game knowledge that the character does not have but the player does to not game related topics. In posts on the SWC forum some posters use OOC or ((…)) to indicate 'out of character' explanations or conversations. As mentioned before the offline status of players is often used as an explanation or excuse why players cannot be online, this we see especially in posts concerning RP events where OOC is used in similar ways to 'real life' to explain absence of the game and in-game behaviour. Role-players sometimes also write IC stories for their characters which can explain their absence or inactivity, but these are accompanied by OOC explanations as to why the player cannot play. The player's out-of-game situation in this case is indicated with OOC and is incorporated in the character's development, and IC is adjusted to fit the OOC situation.

> ((I was unfortunately not able to attend the funeral due to my crappy broadband connection))
> ("Dead Man's Funeral" thread)
>
> [IC storyline] ----------------------------
> This is a CLOSED RP storyline describing a quest I am undertaking to give our guild members a defense against Armos' strange powers. it covers the fact that, for a very short period, I'll have reduced ability to be online and as such is a cover for my absence from the game."
> ("Far Traveller (closed RP)" thread)

((…)) is used to indicate OOC and can be used to indicate in-game but 'out of character' topics, but it is also used to indicate a player's out-of-game situation, such as Internet connection, 'real' relationships, reasons to play, previous role-play experience etcetera. Since OOC refers to the player's situation we can say that if the player is located in 'real life', OOC refers to a RL state. Sometimes OOC is even used synonymously to 'real life'. However, in OOC comments in-game developments can be discussed, and generally game related issues are not labelled RL by the players. Furthermore, from the stickied RP guides on the forum it becomes clear that OOC comments are also used in-game to improve the role-play by improving understanding, consent and interaction between the players in order to be able to develop the role-play.

In their role-play role-players distinguish between the fantasy world, 'in character', and the 'real world' or 'real life', 'out of character'. Role-players' avoidance of 'real life' in role-play emphasizes 'real life' and the distinction between fantasy world and RL. 'Out of

character' comments can occur in-game as well as on the forum. On the forum OOC comments are most commonly used in a similar way as 'real life', to refer to the player's situation and explain behaviour or absence.

Player versus character

In role-play the use of OOC and IC references supposedly distinguishes between the player and the character. It is important for role-players to make this distinction and to make sure that other players know the difference between their character and the player behind the character. Big developments of guilds or characters are often accompanied by 'out of character' reasons or clues as to the development. A good example of the distinction made between players and characters is the way players distinguish their IC rivals and OOC rivals. OOC rivals often refer to certain play styles:

> OOC it's probably leeters, beggars, and honour leaches.
> ("Who is/are your rival(s)" thread)

'In character' rivalry show the distinction between character and players that players make. Certain characters or guilds play more evil minded characters or roles, these can be rivals or disliked by the more good aligned characters and guilds, this however does not mean that the players are each others rivals. For example, one of the -judging by the forum- most famous and influential role-play guilds is the Scarlet Missionary. This guild consists only of human characters who 'in character' despise all other races and fulfil some sort of police force that tries to rule Stormwind and cleanse the city from all races except humans. Several posts in the "Who is/are your rival(s)" thread and other threads list this guild and its members as their rivals or enemies, but comment 'out of character' that they have great respect for the players.

> Heh weil Out of Character I adore the Scarlets to the extent of wanting to /hug every single one of them.
> But of course In Character things are rather different.
> ("Who is/are your rival(s)" thread)

That a distinction between player and character is important to players becomes most clear in threads where remarks are made to players that do not make this distinction and dislike other players because of their 'in character' behaviour. For example, as becomes clear from several posts of different members of the just mentioned guild Scarlet Missionary this guild and its members experience much hatred in-game. Although the hatred can be understood in a role-play 'in character' setting, the members of this guild also get harassed and commented upon in an OOC matter. Not all players it seems make the distinction between IC and OOC.

> I will admit that I find it really annoying how people judge my character or even my personality OOC by my tabard.
> ("<Scarlet Missionary> leaves the Assembly" thread)

> I can't belive scarlets are being insulted OOC that is horrible. In character all my characters hate Scarlet maybe not Alianaarcane who is still under the impression Scarlet does more to restore Lordearon then the Alliance ever will.
> But as a person me myself I have nothing but respect for the scarlets that they can endure some insults I sometimes see thrown at them during preaches. Like…let's not say that I'm sure blizzard won't like that but I'm pretty sure that it wasn't IC as the word noob was involved.
> ("OOC post – Harassment of <Scarlet Missionary>" thread)

That players' in-game and forum behaviour is not only credited to the character but to players' 'real life' personality and situation has already been shown in the part on play behaviour. As mentioned before, in the *greetings* threads players say "hello" to the community or express their holiday wishes in a mixed IC/OOC style and it is often unclear whether or not the post is meant IC or OOC. That the distinction between IC and OOC is not always clear is also exemplified by the thread "How would you Describe Harsufeld?". This thread is started by the player of the character Harsufeld who states in the original post:

> ((Though i may ask this [How would you describe Harsufeld?] to see what people's opinions were of me! It would be interesting. Am i kind, evil, mad? Go Nuts!))
> ("How would you Describe Harsufeld?" thread)

Most replies to this post in OOC comments state what their 'in character' attitude to the character Harsufeld is, however for some players it is unclear if the poster referred to the player or the character as one for example wrote:

> Before he made this thread I thought of him as a fine RPer who got on with playing and had fun/
> Now he has made this thread I think of him as an ego-stroker and attention seeker.
> /sigh
> ("How would you Describe Harsufeld?" thread)

While most responses to the original post address their attitude towards the character this poster explicitly refers to the player behind the character. A few other replies also mention attention seeking, however it is unclear whether or not the comments are addressed to the player or the character. The original poster responds to this by quoting the above post and stating:

> ((I didn't mean it like that. I was wanting to know what people saw harsufeld as. Not about how great he is. I know He's a bit of what Honoria said [reference to other post which stated he was no good loathsome, foolish, selfish liar and which of course was 'in character']. But he is a also a nice person who loves his bunny! Sometimes the only way to know how you are doing is to ask someone!))
> ("How would you Describe Harsufeld?" thread)

So, the original poster wanted to know how other players perceived his character in order to see if his role-played character was perceived as he intended to play the character. However, since the original poster made use of the brackets to indicate an OOC comment it could indeed be read as wondering about the character, because the character would not ask but the

player wants to know, or it could be read as if the player wants to know how others perceive the player. In this case the use of IC and OOC is almost more confusing instead of clarifying.

For role-players however it is almost crucial that players understand the difference between the 'in character' and 'out of character' difference, especially for those who play dislikeable or evil aligned characters. However, at the same time role-players also claim that in-game and forum behaviour originates from a player's RL personality. In one thread the Scarlet Missionary warns against a 'stalker' and copy-cat player who harasses the Scarlet Missionary after having been kicked out of the guild for using racist and abusive language. This player has now created a copy-cat guild with names similar to the original guild, where just an extra 's' or another letter is added, and with the same uniforms as the original guild. So, players less familiar with the original guild might not notice the difference. Furthermore this player seems to want to discredit the original guild and interrupts their role-play events. While the Scarlet Missionary has notified Blizzard, Blizzard claims they cannot do anything and thus the Scarlet Missionary uses the forum to warn the community against this 'stalker'. The many replies show the support of the RP community to the original Scarlet Missionary guild, even though 'in character' it is the most hated guild. The discussion also shows clearly that the in-game behaviour of the 'stalker' is linked to player's 'real life' personality.

> Its very sad that this guy is such a loser that he feels the need to spend all his game time and energy harrassing his former guild in this childish way rather than doing his own RP, levelling, PvPing, or doing an of the millions of other things Warcraft can offer other than being a 'tard.
>
> A while ago on one of my (now deleted) alts, I was invited to a guild (which I have forgotten the name of) which seemed to have a similar motive. When I asked the guild master what they did, he said "abuse Scarlets, duel them in the streets, just make their lifes hell". I shoulda told you guys, but I'm sorry I didn't. I think that this could be one of the people who mix up IC and OOC, for example one or two people I have heard of hate Armos (IRL) because he is leader of the Twilights. Idiots.
>
> Hopefully this child's account will be banned and when his parents ask him why he can't go on World of Warcraft, he will hopefully explain to them why he has and hopefully he get the help he **really** needs.
> (quotes from "OOC post – Harassment of <Scarlet Missionary>" thread, emphasis in original post)

So, while it is necessary and a guideline for role-players to distinguish between IC and OOC role-players do believe that in-game behaviour is closely related to and might even originate from RL. In-game and forum behaviour is linked to a player's personality and RL situation. This becomes clear from a thread created by Snorkyorky in which he asks:

> I need an honest opinion. Am i bad at RP. Cause i have been banned from the horde rp channel and been told mby people i am annoying so i need your honest opinion.
> ("I need an honest opinon." thread)

In chapter two I discussed the general findings of reading the SWC forum and stated that there are several 'main posters' on the forum, of which one is very active but generally not

appreciated. This is that player. The thread got a lot of replies (49), although towards the end the discussion has diverted from the original posters intent. Concerning the original intent of the thread the general reply of other role-players is the same and along the lines of the following quote:

> Personally, I find you irritating. Your endless one-line forum posts and responses to threads really bug me. I don't much like your style of roleplay either […]
> However all that aside your main, redeeming feature is that **you try**. You put your efforts and energies into **your** roleplay and that's really what counts. I think you could do with a little more focus and consistency and channel your energy more constructively but you're one of the small cross-section of people, Horde-side on Steamwheedle Cartel that put the effort in.
> ("I need an honest opinon." thread, emphasis in original post)

Most of the repliers do not appreciate Snorkyorky's forum behaviour or his style of role-play, however they greatly appreciate that he really tries and give tips and constructive criticism on how to improve his RP. Several repliers state that one of the ways Snorky could improve his RP is to distinguish clearer between IC and OOC.

> […] I do have experience of being around you IC and have observed you in both IC and OOC mode. It seems to me that they blur a lot with you Snorky. I'm quite aware that on Horde side it can be easy to 'forget' IC at times and not be so aware if you're IC or OOC. Perhaps you should concentrate a bit on this?
> ("I need an honest opinon." thread)

That players consider Snorkyorky's behaviour to originate from RL situations is clear from several references to the player's young age and lack of role-play experience in contrast to some of the role-players who have over twenty years of role-play experience. Furthermore, many refer to Snorkyorky's "over enthusiastic" behaviour and that he could be a bit more relaxed. This clearly is not considered a part of the character but of the player, as almost all replies state that the player could maybe relax a bit before he starts playing.

> I know you're enthusiastic (people here will be nodding going "yes Snorky is enthusiastic") but try to tone it down a bit. If you're really that coiled up like a spring then go outside and run around or get a gym membership and unwind a bit in a different manner. Trust me.. you'll appreciate your experience of Azeroth all that bit more for being a bit more relaxed when you do it.
> ("I need an honest opinon." thread)

All these examples have shown that role-players want to make a clear distinction between 'in character' and 'out of character' behaviour. During the time of research I have only found one post in which the player, an older well experienced role-player, acknowledges explicitly the link between character and player, while still stating that the distinction is important.

> Whilst I think it's important not to mix real life and online, fantasy life too much, basing some aspect of your character on real life experiences can often be very exploratory and ultimately fulfilling. […] Identifying on some personal level with your character is, in my mind, no bad thing – as long as that little bit of yourself that presents itself in your character doesn't impinge upon other people's play.
> ("Principles of Roleplaying" thread)

'In character' is linked to the character and the in-game, fantasy world, which is sometimes continued in IC storylines on the forum. 'Out of character' is linked to the player and OOC behaviour is linked to the player's 'real life'. However, the distinction between IC and OOC is not always very clear and when play style and behaviour are discussed it becomes clear that players believe IC in-game and forum behaviour originate from a player's 'real life'.

'Real life' as immersion breaking

That role-players want role-play on 'their' realm is clear, but what kind of role-play they want differs. As discussions under *player versus character* have shown it is the willingness to role-play that is most important, but the way a player role-plays is important too. We have also seen that role-players want a clear distinction between 'out of character' and 'in character' behaviour, between the player and the character. This happens even though many aspects of play and role-players' own discussion about game aspects show that this distinction is in fact blurred. Role-players' aim is to be immersed in the game world and act out their characters, and aspects from 'real life' and the 'real world' that are inconsistent with the fantasy game world are considered immersion breaking and undesired. Blizzard's rules for role-play realms try to minimize immersion breaking by prohibiting references to 'real life' and 'real world'.[37] Role-players want role-play in the game to be consistent and plausible with the fantasy world they imagine *World of Warcraft* to be. As one of the role-play principles in the stickied "Principles of Roleplaying" thread states:

> **1. Plausibility**
> This is the crux of any good roleplay. It tends to apply to everything from how you play your character to how you organise the mechanics of large scale events. If roleplay is implausible, it quickly becomes ridiculous. Other players will not want to interact with you and inevitably, your event will fail.
> An event must be plausible within the context of the game universe. That means no automatic weapons in a fantasy setting, no magic in a cyberpunk setting and so on. This applies to your characters description and any interaction you might have with other players. Lack of plausibility is the usual cause of everyone's pet hate: the power-emote. What might start out as a gentle interaction between two consenting roleplayers rapidly spirals out of control as one pulls out a knife and stabs the other in the chest, who in turn happens to have the blow deflected by a hip flask and... well, you get the idea. Initially, these power-emotes may seem plausible (of course it's reasonable for a character to be carrying a hip flask) however the sequence of seemingly random coincidences most definitely is not. Try to consider whether your actions, your character's behaviour and their background are plausible. I cannot stress enough how frustrating it is to try an interact with someone who can turn into a demon/dragon/angel/robot at will or who has inherited the power of the gods from their father/mother who happens to be a major deity. Again, this sort of thing rapidly becomes ridiculous and ceases to be fun for all involved.
> ("Principles of Roleplaying" thread, emphasis in original post)

Names referring to 'real life', chatting about 'real world' events and actions are considered inconsistent with the fantasy world. Just like 'in character' and 'out of character' is preferably

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[37] Blizzard's rules in relation to 'real life' and 'real world' references will be discussed more under the heading *Blizzard's not real game*.

separated, the fantasy game world is another place than the 'real world' and the 'real world' should not be included in the fantasy world. Role-play for many should be as consistent as possible with the lore of the game. The lore of the game is considered to be the basics from which to role-play and role-players set up in-game role-play communities with the aim of 'in character' teaching about the lore and background of Azeroth.

> (([…] Just because the players know the lore doesn't mean the characters should.))
> ("Protect the Horde! ((a crazy idea))" thread)
>
> Shamefully i can't be EVERYWHERE and people keep doing things that is against the lore and ways of the races or alliance in whole.
> ("Cenarion Expedition" thread)

On the SWC forum role-players discuss lore and lore aspects. After *The Burning Crusade* expansion for example there are several discussions on how the implementation of the new areas and new races can be accounted for in line with the world that existed and what plausible reactions of characters will be to these new races and areas.

> I think the Blood elves are a natural choice for an expansion race given their background so I say they are a good addition. That they are a part of the Horde is just another unfortunate effect of the faction system. The only serious mistake is their involvement with the Naaru. That's just an overly complicated solution that doesn't fit very well with the overall lore.
> In any case they are far better then the pewpew space shrimp shamans and their Star Trek totems…
> [referring to the Draenei, the other new race that will be implemented by the expansion]
>
> Can't wait for Blood Elves personally... The scope for tension within the Horde, and thier rich history in lore should make for some great RP opportunities. It's what will make me return to the Horde after so long on the Alliance side.
> As opposed to the Draenei - but I will state this is only my opinion, and does not reflect that of my guild, friends or factual with the lore, it's just my opinion - who have been presented in a pew-pew space shaman way. I don't know, the Draenei could have been so much MORE, but they are just another Light worshipping race for the Alliance, bung them in and they all get along fine. Sometimes it feels like the only race with a rich cultural history are the Night Elves.
> (quotes from "Blood Elf reaction" thread)

The lore, however, is not based on in-game knowledge alone. Of course, it is based on information provided by Blizzard, but players also refer to other books and the fantasy genre in general in order to account for consistency or point to inconsistency. In threads that concern lore discussions, one specific role-player for example frequently quotes player guides and fantasy books. Other players ask this player for tips on which books to read in order to learn more about the lore and discuss what is stated by referring to other books.

> Any such things as "blood" family is extreeeemely rare with the Night Elf society/family.
> How come i know this? Read The "Alliance Player's Guide" published by Sword and Sorcery.
> There is an Horde Player's Guide as well…
> ("Cenarion Expedition" thread)
>
> "Each of the seven major human cities had diffrent traditions, and Stormwind has become a melting pot of these ideas and customs, due to the sheer number of refugees from every part of the globe who hasve traveled there for safe haven."
> Facts taken from "Alliance Player's Guide" a book published from Sword and Sorcery
> ("<Scarlet Missionary> leaves the Assembly" thread)

That plausibility and consistency within the game world is important becomes clear from a big discussion initiated by the previously mentioned RP guild Scarlet Missionary leaving a RP community called the Assembly. The Assembly seems to be a cooperation between several RP guilds that role-play together and enforce laws in Stormwind city. The Scarlet Missionary will no longer be part of the Assembly because the guild believes a certain law that was going to be put in motion is too modern and not consistent with the fantasy world.

> If players want to RP modern laws and modern society, there are other RP games they can be involved in. But many members of my guild RP in a WoW environment to RP a non-modern world.
>
> Chrucrh courts and such are very much in keeping with the theme of the Lore and Mecieval society that it makes sense, trying to bring laws in that are only in exsistance in the Modern world is a bit silly and unrealistic as they have no place within the game mechanics.
> (quotes from "<Scarlet Missionary> leaves the Assembly" thread)

The discussion however is not only about the plausibility of the laws that were going to be implemented, but also about how the community communicated with each other about the implementation of the law. Furthermore, the discussion addresses how to role-play within a community and refer the necessity of OOC consent before IC developments can happen. Both the Assembly as well as Scarlet Missionary blame each other of "poweremoting", leaving no room for other players to interact but positioning yourself above everyone else and thus disabling interaction.

> Using the argument of "modern" as opposed to "lore" is invalid in reference to most of the roleplay on this server, and it has been pointed out, numerous times, that there are a number of Lore inaccuracies with the Missionary's own roleplay. If your character finds a law too modern, or inaccurate, then there is always the possibility of reacting to it, as has always been the case in regards to debate within the Assembly.
> In regard to the Mission's new position, IC it effectively places them above any kind of law save their own, granting themselves the full support of the King, and making void any kind of attempt from player characters to impact upon their presence in Stormwind. The "logic" behind this matters little, as it was motivated more by OOC opinions than any true IC direction. In fact, it was made clear by Habeus numerous times before that he would not accept OOC any kind of attempt IC to remove the Scarlets from Stormwind, however logical or plausible those attempts may have been.
> OOC, I will simply say as I have said before. A member of a roleplaying community in WoW cannot expect to impact heavily or try to impact heavily on the community, and not give its consent to being impacted in return by the consequences of its IC actions. Making the guild immune in such a way to any attempt at conflict or antagonism makes their very existence farcical, and very suddenly extremely opposed to the position they held or tried to hold within Stormwind roleplay for the very long time when they had no antagonists.
> It is certainly a shame that the situation had to come to this, a complete lack of cooperation with other guilds and members of the community.
> (player of the Assembly in "<Scarlet Missionary> leaves the Assembly" thread)
>
> I explained that my guild would not RP with a law if we didn't get to OOC consent to it. As Berdrin told me that our OOC consent was irrelevant, we deemed his actions a power emote and choose to find an IC way to ignore them.
> (player of Scarlet Missionary in "<Scarlet Missionary> leaves the Assembly" thread)
>
> As I and Dufferin have said above, we have created a realistic IC excuse to avoid what we see as the poweremoting of the Assembly that wanted to make us RP something when we said we were not OOC happy doing it.
> (player of Scarlet Missionary in "<Scarlet Missionary> leaves the Assembly" thread)

The many and lengthy discussions role-players have on the forum about lore and consistency in role-play show that this is very important. However, the discussions also show that not all players imagine the world in the same way and consider different actions as either immersive or immersion breaking. By many *World of Warcraft* is considered a more medieval fantasy world, and modern or 'real world' references are considered to be immersion breaking. The 'real world' is inconsistent with the players' imagination of the fantasy world and they prefer an absence of 'real life' from the game. The 'real world' is another world than the game world and breaks the illusion of a fantasy world.

'Real life' as validation of the fantasy world

References to the 'real world' are not only made to point to a breaking and inconsistency with the fantasy world, but are also used as a validation of the fantasy world. Especially, the plausibility of role-played characters' behaviour is measured in how people in the 'real world' behave. For example in the discussion about the Scarlet Missionary leaving the Assembly because players OOC considered the Assembly becoming too modern for the WoW setting the actual 'in character' act of the Scarlet Missionary leaving is discussed as plausible or not with references to how medieval church power worked.

> OOC:
> Perhaps what Habeus means to say that they will continue as they once did: to hold their own courts and law enforcement within the guild. I actually think it's quite plausible to do so since we're playing in a Medieval time and as I've understood, the church had their own way while the public had another way.
> (role-player responding to the discussion in "<Scarlet Missionary> leaves the Assembly" thread)
>
> Yes World of Warcraft has a few feelings of the western middel ages. But it is NOT a medival world in the sense that we can draw upon every idea from our own. For one the legal system should be heavily influensed by both the dwarfs and the elfs legal system. It should be a safe bet that both those races have reached conclutions that no dark age medival lord reached or practices. So please be carefull in those views. The huge range of roleplay interests and ideas on this server perhaps makes a "modern" leagal system more easy to swallow for most.
> (role-player responding to the discussion in "<Scarlet Missionary> leaves the Assembly" thread)

The fantasy world is thus validated by references to the idea players have of historical events and situations of the 'real world'. Threads where players give advice about how to role-play and the stickied role-play guides show that while the fantasy game world is a different world, a certain etiquette is in place which is similar to that of 'real life' and a breaking of the 'real life' etiquette is actually considered to be immersion breaking.

> - remember that you can't see peoples names hovering over them in real life (pity !)
> - so when you speak with someone you are not familiar with introduce yourself
> and ask them to do the same.
> ("I need an honest opinon" thread)
>
> I think another problem faced with RP'ers is those who want to do so well - they pour an enormous amount of time into that character and before you know it you got their life story within 10 minutes of

> meeting them. This - like it does in RL - puts me off wanting to RP with that char. The background stories can indeed come through in your style of RP and of course in some of those deep conversations between others. But let's face it - many of us don't go into so much detail about our RL's in everyday chat.
> ("Principles of Roleplaying thread")

> Interesting point about consistancy, that...
> For my money, I fail to see any reason why a character shouldn't occasionally make fairly big changes. After all, we humans often make big changes to ourselves in real life, and if it happens "IRL", then it's got to be fair game as an RP concept.
> ("Principles of Roleplaying" thread)

While 'real world' references such as technical devices, references and discussions of 'out of character' nature are seen as immersion breaking, 'in character' behaviour is more plausible the more it resembles 'real life' behaviour. In this sense 'real world' is used as a validation for the plausibility of the fantasy game world. 'Real world' is thus a different and separate world from the game world and 'real world' breaks the immersion of being in the fantasy game world. However, the plausibility of the fantasy game world is based upon the players' ideas gained from the 'real world', from fantasy books, films, the genre, history and 'real life'.

Blizzard's not 'real' game

Not only players make use of the concepts 'real life' and 'real world' in their communication about *World of Warcraft*. Blizzard Entertainment, WoW's developer and publisher, uses these concepts in contrast to the game world. The game is presented as a way out of 'real life', the game world is another place where players can enjoy and play away from their 'real life'. The opening of the online guide for WoW, for example, says:

> As a massively multiplayer online game, World of Warcraft enables thousands of players to come together online and battle against the world and each other. Players from across the globe can leave the real world behind and undertake grand quests and heroic exploits in a land of fantastic adventure.[38]

The game thus offers its players a way to escape the 'real world' according to Blizzard. That RL is something out-of-game according to Blizzard becomes especially clear from the opening post of Blizzard on the Community Forum Events. [39] In this post Blizzard indicates the purpose of the specific forum and gives advice on how to use the forum. Out-of-game in this post is used in a similar way as 'real life'.

> If you are creating an out of game event, please specify this with a tag as well as:
> *Examples:*
> [Out of Game] Lan party in Sweden (dd/mm)
> [RL] Real Life meet up in London (dd/mm)

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[38] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "WoW Guide", http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/basics/guide.html (accessed June 24, 2007).
[39] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Community Events forum", http://forums.wow-europe.com/board.html?forumId=110221&sid=1 (accessed June 24, 2007).

Not only in the way Blizzard presents the game to its players but also in the game rules 'real life' and 'real world' are mentioned as distinct and separated from WoW. Property rules, for example, show that the game is contrasted to the 'real world'.

> So Blizzard Entertainment does not recognize any property claims outside of World of Warcraft or the purported sale, gift or trade in the "real world" of anything related to World of Warcraft. Accordingly, you may not sell or purchase virtual items for "real" money or exchange items outside of World of Warcraft.[40]

The game world is juxtaposed with the 'real world' and different rules apply to these worlds, and their relationship. Blizzard's rules however do not only refer to the 'real world' to indicate how the game's relation is to the 'real world', but, just like the players, Blizzard also mentions 'real life' in relation to in-game playing behaviour. Blizzard states in their rules that players have to remember that they play together with thousands of other players and that respectful behaviour is desired. The rules help to regulate the in-game environment so that many can have a pleasant playing experience. Players can get warnings and eventually be banned from the game for their in-game and forum language and behaviour. On harassment issues Blizzard has the following policy:

> Only the most severe harassment (i.e. Racial/Ethnic, Extreme Sexual/Violence, Real-life threats) will be considered.[41]

The 'real life' information and threats category is described by Blizzard to include violence that is not directly related to the game world and the release of 'real life' information about other players or Blizzard employees. In this sense Blizzard's 'real life' can be compared to the players' use of 'personal', which is at times used synonymous to 'real life'. Although Blizzard does not state explicitly what 'real life' information includes but it seems that 'real life' is out-of-game and personal, while in-game is more public. Even though the use of the term 'real life' by Blizzard seems to indicate a separation between the in-game world and RL their rules in fact transgress these boundaries. This transgression does not only stem from the mentioning 'real life' in the rules and in limiting the possible in-game behaviour with rules from outside the game, but also because these rules may have 'real life' consequences. Players that have been found to disregard these rules can get a warning or be suspended from the game, and even

> Incur further real-life repercussions depending on the severity of the threat.[42]

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[40] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Terms of Use", http://www.wow-europe.com/en/legal/termsofuse.html (accessed June 24, 2007).
[41] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Harassment Policy", http://www.wow-europe.com/en/policy/harassmentp1.html (accessed June 24, 2007).
[42] Ibid.

The point of view that there is a relation between in-game and forum behaviour, and 'real life' is not limited to the players but is also shared by Blizzard. The rules of the game even state that such behaviour can have repercussions in 'real life'. Instead of a clear separation, there is a certain transgression of boundaries and merging of in-game and out-of-game life.

As mentioned in chapter two in order to create an as immersive as possible world Blizzard has implemented additional rules for role-play realms. These additional rules are concerned with harassment of role-players and 'out of character' chat. Different rules apply to the different more private and public chat channels in WoW. In certain channels 'out of character' and non-fantasy dialogues are not allowed and violations of these rules may result in a warning or temporary suspension from the game.

One rule that causes a lot of discussion amongst players, especially amongst role-players, is the naming policy. Blizzard's naming policy is fairly extensive and violation of the naming policy may result in warnings, temporary or permanent suspension from the game. Blizzard stresses the importance of a character's name because other players' first impression will be based upon it. Employees of Blizzard can change or force players to change their names if these are deemed inappropriate. These rules do not only apply to the English language, since the European realms hold players from different nationalities and languages. Names considered inappropriate by Blizzard are not based upon in-game but rather on out-of-game connotations. Highly inappropriate names are clear and masked names with references to paedophilia, racial or ethnic references, sexual or violent references, national connotations and obscene or vulgar references. These categories include references to 'real life' actions or connotations originating from outside WoW. Moderately inappropriate names include inappropriate references to human anatomy or bodily functions; insulting references to characters, players, Blizzard employees or groups of people either based in-game or out-of-game; mimicking of religious practices and figures; mimicking of political groups or figures; references to illegal activities; advertisement or trademarks; references to popular culture and media; titles and gibberish. As these categories show the inappropriateness of names in WoW is not based upon the game world, but rather is based upon the cultural and societal norms that exist outside the game which are transferred into the game world by means of these rules.[43]

While these general naming policy rules already show a relation between the in-game and out-of-game contexts and sometimes explicitly state that references to 'real life' actions are not allowed, the additional naming rules for role-play realms emphasize the transgression

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[43] World of Warcraft Europe, Blizzard Entertainment, "Naming policy", http://www.wow-europe.com/en/policy/namingp1.html (accessed 23 June 2007).

of in-game and out-of-game even more. On role-play realms the additional violations are considered mildly inappropriate and include:

- Partial or Complete Sentences (Does not apply to Guild Names)
- Real World References
- Contain "Leet" or "Dudespeak"
- Immersion breaking titles[44]

The 'real world' references category in this case resembles the popular culture and media figures category of the general naming policy, only that "references to very well known people, characters, places or icons" is not limited to popular culture and media.[45] As this rule shows the pre-existing knowledge of players is important for their gaming experience. Names that break the game immersion violate the role-play naming policy as well, however, as we have seen in the discussion of the empirical data, players have different opinions as to what is or is not consistent with the game world and may have different opinions upon what is considered immersion breaking. Problems regarding policies occur because the enactment of the gaming policies is basically based upon player-player surveillance, since Blizzard only acts upon requests and complaints of players about other players.

That the rules of the naming policy in relation to the 'real world' cause problems becomes clear by a popular thread on the Steamwheedle Cartel forum. In the thread "Naming policy violation?" a player whose character name is Midnighter explains he got warned by a Blizzard employee and had to change his name. This player who has been playing with this character for over a year is not only unhappy about the fact that he has to change his name, but also about the way Blizzard dealt with him, especially since he himself could not see how his name was in violation with the rules. Since Blizzard did not respond to his inquiry as to why his name was breaching the naming policy the player posted his experience on the forum for other players to read. In the many replies to this post a discussion around the naming policy evolves about whether or not the name Midnighter is inconsistent with the policy and whether or not it is considered immersion breaking. While in the end Midnighter gets his name restored the discussion shows some interesting aspects of the relation between the 'real world' and game world and Blizzard's rules.

Midnighter, as it turns out, is a fictional comic book gay superhero and since this is a reference to popular culture and the 'real world' the players suspect this is the reason why the name is not allowed. However, another player's name is Riddic, which is also the name of a movie character. And even though another replier states she has reported him the Blizzard

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

employee told her that he could not do anything about that name. So the Riddic player wonders:

> what *exactly* is a violation of naming policy? If it's up to GM [Game Master] to decide how our characters are named, and he decides that 'Riddic' is better than 'Midnighter' despite the fact that both names have similar source (well-known movie/comic character), how do we name our characters correctly?
> ("Naming policy violation?" thread, emphasis in original)

As the discussion on the forum makes clear, problems arise because it is related to players pre-existing knowledge and imagination of the fictional world of the game. Not all players have the same cultural knowledge and a name that could break immersion for one player does not have to break the immersion for another player. Since the policy system relies upon players reporting other players this becomes problematic. In the discussion some players argue that certain names such as 'Johnhunter' break their immersion and are not believable because they do not resemble the way parents would name their children 'in real life', however another player states:

> note that people used to be called "John the Miller" and "Thom the Thief" - so Daverogue, however offensive, is even close to historic habits.
> ("Naming policy violation?" thread)

As we have seen before players have different imaginations of the fictional world of WoW. Immersion breaking is not only related to the pre-existing cultural knowledge and imagination of the world by players, but is also linked to nationality and language. As another replier in this naming policy thread exemplifies the presence of many different nationalities and languages makes it even harder to find an appropriate name. This player named his character Angst based upon dwarf lore he found in-game, however 'angst' means 'fear' in many Nordic languages and now the player gets a lot of comments on his name as not being in line with the lore.[46] In this case, just like in the case of Midnighter, the player himself did not have the knowledge that other players do and therefore breached the rules.

The discussion generated by the naming policy thread remarks upon Blizzard's inconsistency with rules, not only because Blizzard carries out their rules inconsistently, but also because Blizzard itself has implemented names and parts in the game which breach their own rules. One reply that exemplifies the general players' attitude states:

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[46] While the name Angst may not hold any offensive language connotations I myself for example have seen several names in WoW which have unpleasant meanings in Dutch. One, for example, was a hunter whose pet was named 'teef', which in Dutch means something similar to bitch. However, the player explained to me that he had chosen that name as he was thinking of the English word thief. However, since writing thief would probably not be in line with the naming policy he choose to write it as it can be pronounced, which in this case ended up to be an insulting word in Dutch.

Even though Blizzard presents the world of Azeroth as a fantasy world that is an escape from 'real life' and rules ban 'real world' references from the game, the world itself is based upon a cultural history of fantasy literature and games. Furthermore, as the players remark, Blizzard itself incorporates 'real world' references in the game, for example non-player characters named Hemmet Nessingwary, Floyd Pinkus, Haris Pilton and a dog Tinkerbell, areas such as Area 52, and instances involving the Wizard of Oz and Red Riding Hood.[47]

The separation between 'real world' and game world is not only dependent upon rules and the game, but is, as we have seen also related to the players national, cultural and language knowledge. Different players and different Blizzard employees hold different opinions about what is considered immersion breaking and what 'real world' references are. These opinions are mainly based upon out-of-game knowledge. Even though players try to follow the rules and try to abstain from 'real world' their playing depends upon other people's perception and knowledge of 'real world' since too many warnings or complaints can get an account banned. No matter how inconsistent, in the end it is like one of the players on the SWC states:

Blizzard has of course the ultimate right to decide how "reality" is shaped.
("Blood Elf reaction" thread)

In its representation of WoW and WoW lore Blizzard distinguishes between the game world and the 'real world', where the 'real world' or 'real life' is contrasted by the game and encompasses that which is non-game. A separation between the game world and 'real world' is seen as favourable for escapism and immersion in the game world. Although policies and rules enforce such a separation by banning 'real world' and 'real life' references, meaning references to out-of-game issues, the policies and rules at the same time breach the separation by stating that 'real life' repercussions can occur based upon in-game activities and by transferring out-of-game norms and values into the game world.

Conclusions

The use of 'real life' by the Steamwheedle Cartel forum writers is normalized and its meaning is not made explicit nor is the use of the concept questioned. 'Real life' seems to indicate a

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[47] An instance is a unique copy of a special area created when a group of players enters that area. If another group of players enters the area they will enter their own copy.

dichotomy, however 'real life's' counterpart(s) remain(s) unnamed. 'Real life' is an ambiguous term which is used by players in reference to different kinds of situations and experiences. 'Real life' is used to indicate offline non-gaming practices and environments. In contrast to the game 'real life' holds a negative and serious connotation as that which is not play and keeps players away from the game. At the same time, 'real life' is valued as more important than the game by players, which becomes especially clear in the evaluation of players having or not having a 'real life' depending upon time spend in or dedicated to the game. The concept is used as a reference to (1) serious aspects of life in contrast to the game or play; (2) everything outside the game; (3) everything offline; and (4) everything not computer related.

While the use of 'real life' indicates a dichotomy, it at the same time disproves this dichotomy. 'Real life' is not always clearly separated from the game. Behaviour and etiquette for example are justified by their relation to or origin in 'real life'. Furthermore, the immersion into the game world is dependent upon its contrast to and the abstinence from the 'real world'. At the same time the credibility of the fictional game world is justified by its resemblance to the 'real world'. Another important aspect that connects the game world and 'real world' is the aspect of time. Not only time and seasons are transferred into the game world, but players' time has to be divided over 'real life' and the game. While playing time is not considered 'real life', 'real life' is linked to the amount of time and the moment of time players can play.

Not only players use 'real life' and 'real world' in contrast to WoW, Blizzard Entertainment presents this game as an escape from the 'real world'. Blizzards' use of 'real life' and 'real world' is similar to that of the players in that the terminology indicates a dichotomy, but often the very practices described by these terms show that there is no clear distinction or separation between the game world and 'real world'. While taking a close look at how 'real life' is constructed, we have learned that the normalized concept is actually much more ambiguous than we might think at first glance and its meaning is contextual. While 'real life' seemingly refers to a dichotomy its counterpart is never mentioned and the use of the concept enforces and breaks down a distinction between 'real life' and game at the same time. The analysis raises questions about the dichotomies used in order to describe online gaming experiences.

4. Theorizing spaces, worlds and activities

> Games maintain a boundary from 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)
>
> If you had seen what I have seen in the last few years, you would sense, as I do, that the line between games and real life has become blurred. (Castranova 2005, 2)
>
> Virtual worlds are not insulated from the real world; they can't be regarded as solely the purview of their designers, publishers, or even players. Their influence extends into the real world, and therefore the real world extends into them. Ultimately, though, the relationship is one-sided: The real world always wins in the end. (Bartle 2004, 65)

The above quotes do not originate from player discussions but are quotes taken from texts written by game designers and game researchers. References to 'real life' and 'real world' are not restricted to players, theorists discussing (online) games make use of these concepts as well. We have seen in chapter three that while the counterpart of 'real life' is never explicitly mentioned by players, 'real life' is a normalized concept which enforces a distinction between game world and 'real life'. At the same time the use of the concept indicates that there is no clear separation. The meanings of concepts such as 'real life' and 'real world' are ambiguous and need to be contextualized. The analysis of the way in which players construct 'real life' raises questions about dichotomies between game world and 'real world', offline and online, play and non-play.

This chapter will reflect upon the findings of the forum analysis by comparing the way in which theorists make use of 'real life', 'real world' and similar concepts to that of the players' use of these concepts. Theoretical terminology indicates dichotomies. This is problematic since it downplays the actual practice of playing games and the relationships that exist. References to 'real world', 'real life', 'everyday life', and similar concepts can indicate that online or gaming experiences are less or not 'real' and are not part of our 'normal, everyday' lives (Bell et al. 2004, 126; Wertheim 1999). Game definitions depending upon the *magic circle* place games as separated in time and space. However, the findings of the forum analysis have shown that the game world and 'real world' are closely related and practices concerning space and time in fact question a separation. The definition of games and relation of space and time to MMORPGs will therefore be discussed. I argue that at least theoretically we should contextualize discussions of (online) games in terms of space and time.

Real Life or Ordinary Daily Life

Not only the way in which players construct and discuss the concepts with which they communicate but also the concepts that scholars use to discuss and theorize online gaming

experiences are important. The act of naming or labelling our own and other people's experiences is important for the way in which we perceive and define these experiences (Becker 1998; Markham 1998; Wertheim 1999). It is therefore important to look at the origin and usage of terminology. I will now look more closely at the way in which online (gaming) experiences have been theorized. We have seen that posters of the Steamwheedle Cartel forum do not reflect upon their terminology, but 'real life' is normalized and part of their vocabulary. Just as players of games are situated and have pre-existing knowledge, the concept 'real life' can also be contextualized. As we have seen in chapter three the term is in fact used in reference to many different aspects of life, but is mainly used in relation to the Internet. In relation to MMORPGs there are two pre-MMORPG areas that have used the concepts 'real life' and 'real world', namely the Internet and games.

Early theories of virtual reality and online technologies distinguished clearly between the virtual, or artificial and the real, or physical, natural world (Rheingold 1991; Slater 2002; Vince 2004). The virtual was explicitly contrasted against and compared to a presupposed and unchallenged 'real' (Markham 1998). Computer-generated environments were treated as artificial and separated from the 'real world'. The Internet era and studies have shown however that the offline/online distinction does not hold and the traditional real/virtual or real/not real binary distinctions are not useful when talking about online experiences (Castronova 2005; Markham 1998; Slater 2002; Taylor 2005). Moving away from these dichotomies while discussing online practices however is not easy and while commenting on the boundary distinction between 'real' and 'virtual' researchers still use them (Castronova 2005; Markham 1998; Taylor 2005).

In the games area 'real life' has been used in contrast to play or game. As we have seen in the analysis of the empirical data players and even Blizzard try to distinguish clearly between the game world and a 'real world'. However, the practices and topics sometimes discussed with the very terms 'real life' and 'real world' show that there is no clear separation. Not only players and Blizzard make a distinction between game world and 'real world'. As briefly explained in chapter one, many definitions of games, and research on computer games rely on a concept based on the term *magic circle*, a term originally coined by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga in 1938 to study how human culture is a product of human play. Huizinga's definition of play is:

> A free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (Huizinga 1949, 13)

This frequently quoted paragraph of Huizinga addresses the two main aspects of Huizinga's *magic circle* and his definition of play that have been taken up by game researchers, namely play as something "outside "ordinary" life" and as separated in time and space (Copier 2006; Juul 2005; Lauteren 2007; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006).

Even though they show connections between game worlds and the 'real world' in their book *Rules of Play* game designers Salen and Zimmerman (2004) define games based upon the *magic circle* as separated from 'real life' or the 'real world' in time and space. They remark upon their use of the *magic circle* that "As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the *real world*." (ibid. 95, emphasis by me). While recognizing that games are not isolated and that the boundaries of the *magic circle* are not impermeable by showing the "overlap between game and *real life*" (ibid. 587, emphasis by me) Salen and Zimmerman maintain that the *magic circle* "frames a distinct space of meaning that is separate from, but still references, the real world." (ibid. 97) In their book Salen and Zimmerman do not frequently refer to 'real life', they do frequently use 'real world' without reflecting upon either of these terms. Games are separated from and contrasted by 'real life' and the 'real world'.

Similarly in *Half-Real* (2005) video game theorist Jesper Juul discusses relationships games can have to the outside world, and then defines games in contrast to 'real life' and the 'real world'. He argues that video games are half-real, as they consist of real rules and a fictional world. Juul develops a classic game model based on previous definitions of games, such as those of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois who "both […] describe games as being outside "normal" life: They are assigned a separate space and time." (ibid. 33) Juul argues that the boundaries "between the game activity and the rest of the world" are not perfect but fuzzy and under constant negotiation (ibid. 36). In the classic game model, negotiable consequences account for the for the relation between the game and 'the rest of the world' and point to a separation, to a certain degree, from 'the rest of the world'. Juul defines negotiable consequences as "The same game [set of rules] can be played with or without *real-life* consequences." (ibid. 36, emphasis by me) 'Real life' is a term not frequently used by Juul, and he does not reflect upon the term. It is used in his classic game model to indicate that games can optionally have 'real life' consequences, and he uses it to point out that "It should be clear that playing a game does not imply literally endorsing the actions in the game or wanting to perform them in real life." (ibid. 21) While Juul describes relationships and overlaps between 'real life', the 'real world', 'the rest of the world' and games throughout his book he still uses these terms as opposites of the game world.

Moving away from the 'magic circle'

As mentioned before, many current game researchers criticize the concept of the *magic circle* and the definitions that make explicit use of this concept. By discussing pervasive games, looking at the historical context of the *magic circle* and the practices of players it is argued that the clear separation indicated by the *magic circle* does not represent players present-day relation to games and hence does not improve an understanding of games and gaming (Castronova 2005; Copier 2005; Lauteren 2007; Nieuwdorp 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Taylor 2005). As sociologist T.L. Taylor (2005) points out in her book *Play between Worlds* "the webs of connections and practices that weave between the game and "nongame" space, the idea that there is an autonomous circle of play set off from the "real world" seems increasingly tenuous." (89) Game researchers try to move away from a distinction between virtual and 'real', between game and non-game towards an in-betweenness of worlds, porous membranes and weak boundary hypothesises (Castronova 2005; Nieuwdorp 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Taylor 2005). However the way MMORPGs, or virtual worlds, are discussed does not reflect this moving away from binary distinctions since the vocabulary used still indicates dichotomies.

The term 'real life' is not as common and frequently used by theorists as it is by players. Not only theorists that make use of the *magic circle*, such as Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and Juul (2005), refer to 'real life' and 'real world' in their literature. On websites and blogs, such as the scholarly blog of Terra Nova on virtual worlds, and online games researcher Nick Yee's Daedalus Project website, RL and 'real life' references are quite commonly made without discussing the very usage of the term.[48] In general in the texts where 'real life' is used it is not commonly used, but when it is used 'real life' is contrasted to play to indicate (offline) non-game life.

'Real world', however, is a much more common term in these texts. The 'real world' is outside the game or virtual world. The game or virtual world is seen as another separate world, a new reality, not part of the 'real world' but one that does influence and is also influenced by the 'real world' (Bartle 2004; Castronova 2005; Juul 2005; Kelly 2 2004; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Economist and virtual worlds researcher Edward Castronova (2005) describes in his book *Synthetic Worlds* the blurring of boundaries and the relations between the inside and outside of the porous membrane as a relation between the 'real world', or Earth, and the game world, as for example: "Everything that people do in the synthetic world

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[48] Terra Nova, http://www.terranova.blogs.com/ (accessed June 24, 2007).
Daedalus Project, Nick Yee, http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/ (accessed June 24, 2007).

has some effect in the real world as well." (ibid. 124) However, towards the end of his book he notes that:

> You may have noticed in part 2 [of the book] we no longer contrast the synthetic world with the "real world"; on the basis of part 1 [of the book] we have to conclude that both of these world are real. They both matter to people and have genuine emotional consequences. If anything, you might use the term *warped reality* to describe the complex nature of truth inside a synthetic world. (ibid. 270, emphasis in original)

For Castronova synthetic worlds are both real and unreal. They are real because these worlds matter to people and can have consequences that transfer the boundaries of the worlds, however "they are unreal in the sense that the resulting patterns of behaviour there are potentially different from those on Earth." (ibid. 170) Castronova is concerned that people will be unable to distinguish between rules that are valid on the inside of the membrane and the outside, he therefore argues that although the membrane is porous we should not do away with it. In literature that addresses issues of addiction the virtual (gaming) world is seen as a danger for the 'real world', a world that might substitute the 'real one' (Castronova 2005; Kelly 2 2004).

Some of the researchers mentioned above, as well as game researchers that abstain from referring to 'real life' or 'real world', refer to 'daily life', 'everyday life', or 'offline ordinary life' in relation to gaming practices (Castronova 2005; Copier 2005; Lauteren 2007; Nieuwdorp 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Taylor 2005). In relation to pervasive games Nieuwdorp (2005), for example, talks about the "'real' physical world of everyday life" and a "membrane that separates the game world from everyday life". In her article on online and offline role-playing games and the usability of the *magic circle* Marinka Copier (2005) asks "What is the relationship between fantasy subculture, fantasy role-playing games and the *daily life* of their participants?" (emphasis by me). She argues that "In role-playing games, but also during their daily life, players are constantly constructing intertextual relationships between imaginary fantasy worlds, history, religion, experiences from daily life, etc." (Copier 2005) In this sense daily life is not the game or playing the game, but is contrasted to it. Similarly Taylor (2005) sometimes makes use of offline (daily) life in comparison or in relation to game spaces, for example: "Much like the ways we do this kind of work [evaluating] all the time, unconsciously, in our *offline daily lives*, MMOGs similarly tap into the work, evaluations, and pleasures of relationships and social networks." (42, emphasis by me) Throughout her book Taylor does not use this term often and mainly refers to offline and online practices, while noting that the distinction between 'virtual and 'real' does not hold the connotations it once did because "We are simply too far along in the

integration of these practices into everyday life for that language to hold the kind of meaning it once did." (ibid. 165). Taylor abstains from terms such as 'real life' and 'real world' and argues for a blurring of boundaries, an in-betweenness of worlds, by looking at actual gaming practices.

> Ultimately, notions that games can become contaminated by the outside world, that they are separate from 'real life', or that they are only something with no real consequences seem to lack resonance with the stories like those presented in this book. (ibid. 153)

While the absence of 'real' in these cases might be less problematic since it does not underplay the realness of the online gaming experiences, the use of terms such as 'daily life', 'everyday life' and 'ordinary life' still seem to indicate dichotomies and separations. Playing a game generally does not seem to be part of this everyday offline life. It seems a binary distinction between an online play environment and an offline non-play environment is still in place even though researchers might not use a normative laden term such as 'real life', terms such as 'everyday life' or 'ordinary life' disregard the practice of gaming as one that does not take part in everyday life. As research has shown, the use of computer-mediated technologies and playing online games is increasingly becoming part of our everyday mundane life (Castronova 2005; Markham 1998; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Taylor 2005). Using terms such as 'daily life' or 'offline everyday life' in contrast to gaming practices still undermines the actual practices.

So far, I have found one article where the use of such terms is not in contrast to the gaming experience. In their article "The Magic is Gone" Pargman and Jakobsson (2006) criticize the attitude in game studies of viewing gaming situations as isolated practices which "leads to a focus on things such as magic circles" and argue "against the strong boundary between the inside and the outside of the magic circle. [A] boundary [that] is described as binary, as on-off, a dichotomy separating magical game situations from non-game ordinary-life situations." Instead of using the terms 'ordinary life' and 'everyday life' in contrast to gaming practices they argue that games have become part of this 'ordinary' or 'everyday life'. Pargman and Jakobsson therefore propose a frames-within-frames model to explain gaming situations, however the basis of this model is the "ordinary-life frame" and thus still makes use of 'ordinary life' to which gaming frames can be added (ibid.).

Reflections upon terminology

Whether it is terms such as 'real life' and 'real world' or 'ordinary life' and 'everyday life' that are used in relation to describe online gaming experiences, the terminology is never questioned or discussed and seems normalized. In chapter three we have seen that MMORPG

players have a similar attitude towards the terms 'real life' and 'real world' which they use but do not reflect upon. The predecessors of MMORPGs are Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), which were based upon role-play games. Users of MUDs made use of the terms 'real life' and RL as well (Bartle 2004; Markham 1998; Turkle 1995; Wertheim 1999). MMORPGs are online virtual play worlds where players can role-play. The discussions on the Steamwheedle Cartel forum have shown that 'real life' is used by players to indicate that which is located offline in the physical world; that which takes place outside the game world or non-play; and even to compare and distinguish between role-play and the 'real world'. However, as time and behavioural discussions showed, 'real life' also indicates the strong connections and interrelatedness between the in-game online experiences and out-of-game offline practices. While players try to make a clear distinction in their communication the very aspects that they discuss by using 'real life' and 'real world' show that there is no such clear distinction.

The only researcher I found who reflects upon her own use of 'real life' and that of users of online technology is Annette Markham (1998) in her book *Life Online*. In her ethnographic research that explores what it means to go online she interviews MUD participants about their online experiences and finds that users of online technologies use 'real life' and 'real world' references inconsistently. While the users distinguish between online and offline in their terminology at the same time many claim there is no difference between their online and offline experiences and instead of a clear separation their practices online are another part of real life.

> As the participants talked about their experiences both online and offline, I realized they were using the terms *real, RL* (real life), and *IRL* (in real life), as if these terms distinguished their "not real", or virtual online identities and lives from their real offline identities and lives. However, as I continued to read closely and interact with the transcripts, I realized this was not the case. […] As I analyzed what they said, I began to understand that *real* and its opposite, *not real*, are becoming less valid frames, not because we are not having real experiences, but because online our experiences cannot be classified into binary states. (Markham 1998, 115-116)

In her book Markham not only reflects upon the participants use of 'real life' but also upon her own use of dichotomies. She uses online and offline as a distinction between virtual and real and uses 'real life' to indicate offline experiences. Although her findings indicate that there is no clear separation between online and offline, and that binary distinctions cannot capture online experiences, Markham cannot get away from thinking of online *or* offline instead of online *and* offline, and uses the terms accordingly.

> Regardless of how it happens, I am imposing a false dichotomy on my participants. I can see that their experiences belie my categories of real/virtual, online/offline. Yet even as I try to give voice to *their* experiences, I find myself slipping back into *my* categories. By even addressing how they *do not* talk about "real" as opposed to "not real", I am still drawing a box, if only to describe what they have stepped out of, or where they are not. (Ibid. 167, emphasis in original)

Markham discusses her notions of a distinction between online and offline, virtual and real as coming from theoretical frameworks. Cyberspace has been studied in ways where offline and online are opposites of each other. She discusses Donna Haraway's (1991) concept of the cyborg as a merging between nature and technology and Markham tries to perceive her participants as cyborgs, however she still perceives this as a tension between opposites and cannot get away from the binary distinction. In her conclusion Markham argues that researchers should study online practices in their own contexts and include texts of online users. Furthermore, researchers should not impose their theoretical categories and false dichotomies upon these contexts.

While the background of Markham's theoretical framework is in online studies and studies of cyberspace her argument upholds for research in a more general sense. In the area of game studies research not only includes an online context where binary distinctions arise, but also a gaming context which generally has been defined using a dichotomy of game and non-game. I do not argue that the conceptualization of the *magic circle*, definitions of games and perceiving games as somehow separated are useless, but I would like to point out the importance of our terminology when discussing practices. As Taylor phrased it:

> While the notion of a magic circle can be a powerful tool for understanding some aspects of gaming, the language can hide (and even mystify) the much messier relationship that exists between spheres – especially in the realm of MMOGs. (Taylor 2005, 152)

Defining games or contrasting games against a 'real world' separates the game world from this 'real world'. Furthermore, the use of 'real' may indicate that this game world is less real. While in general the use of the problematic and normative 'real' is not commonly used by researchers to refer to our lives, the use of terms such as 'everyday life' or 'ordinary life' seem to place games as distinct and outside our everyday practices. So we might wonder, what are the presupposed concepts from which we start? What is daily life or ordinary life? As the empirical data has shown, playing games is not disconnected or separated from our non-gaming experiences, identity and activities. Technology is part of our everyday lives and playing (online) computer games can be so incorporated in players' lives that it becomes a mundane, everyday activity (Castronova 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Taylor 2005). If we want to understand and discuss games and gaming we need to contextualize the practice of playing games and we need to contextualize our terminology.

Summarizing we can say that while virtuality research and discussions seemed to presuppose a fundamental 'real', game research seems to presuppose a 'real world' and an 'ordinary, everyday life' to which we can contrast the gaming practice. Both players and

theorists make use of their terminology in normalized ways. But while players seem to want to make sure there is a distinction, many researchers, except for those that focus and are concerned with health issues, do not want to make a separation but use terminology which indicates it anyways. Paradoxically, it is the players who do not name the counterpart of 'real life', while theorists indicate and contrast between the game and 'real world' or 'everyday life'. For players 'real life' is a normative term and 'real life' is considered more important. Most theorists, except for those that are concerned because of addictive aspects, do not make this normative distinction. Furthermore, the discussion of the empirical data in chapter three has shown that there is no clear separation, but a strong relation between in-game and out-of-game practices and activities instead. This is in line with current game theory which argues for a moving away from strict separations based upon the *magic circle* towards a blurring of boundaries or porous membranes which allow for the interrelations between game and non-game environments. However the terminology used by game researchers does not seem to integrate gaming practices as something that players can incorporate in their daily lives, while the discussion of the empirical data showed that this is in fact what many players do.

Sites of contextualization: Space and Time

Game definitions and the concept of the *magic circle* place games in a separated time and space sphere. The analysis of the empirical data showing how *World of Warcraft* players relate to the concept 'real life' has shown that instead of a clearly bounded off space and time the out-of-game situations and practices of players strongly influence their gaming experience. Play is situational and in order to better understand players relation to games and gaming experiences gaming practices need to be contextualized.

Where do we play? Play space and meta-gaming

As mentioned before the concept of the *magic circle* in relation to games has been used for two main characteristics: play as separated from 'ordinary life' and as separated in time and space (Copier 2006; Juul 2005; Lauteren 2007; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006). The idea of a closed of game space within which play occurs is contested by games which are perceived to exist on the boundaries of the *magic circle*, as for example pervasive games (Juul 2005; Nieuwdorp 2006; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). But not only boundary cases of games question the separation of space

and time, practices of metagaming indicate that we cannot make a clear distinction between game and non-game spaces.

> Metagaming refers to the relationship between the game and outside elements, including everything from player attitudes and play styles to social reputations and social contexts in which the game is played. […] In all cases, the metagame refers to the way a game engages with factors permeating the space beyond the edges of the magic circle. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 481)

Based upon a model of game designer Richard Garfield metagaming is divided into four categories by Salen and Zimmerman (2004). These metagaming categories take place on the brink of the boundaries of the *magic circle* and beyond, and include: (1) "what a player brings *to* a game", such as game resources, strategic knowledge and player reputation; (2) "what a player takes away *from* a game" such as the gaming experience itself; (3) "what happens *between* games", such as reflection upon the game; and (4) "what happens *during* a game other than the game itself", which "refers to the influence of real life on a game in play," such as the playing environment (Ibid. 482-483). Metagaming thus refers to game related activities and practices which do not occur within the game's *magic circle*.

Participating on game related forums and engagement in player communities in this sense is a form of metagaming. Metagaming practices are not separated from the gaming experience, in fact, as Salen and Zimmerman (2004), Castronova (2005) and Taylor (2005) exemplify by indicating the importance of third party services metagaming practices constitute an important part of the gaming experience and are, at least for the players, not separated from the game. As briefly discussed in chapter two, players not only organize, discuss and reflect upon gaming experiences on the Steamwheedle Cartel forum, but in-game developments are continued on the forum. Forum games and role-play exemplify that play continues on the forum. In-game role-play storylines start, develop or continue on the forum; the forum space thus becomes game space as well. Furthermore, from the topics discussed on the SWC forum we have seen that players create fan art, organize events, manage communities, read books, and look up game related information in order to progress in-game or improve their in-game play. It is, however, unclear if the players consider these activities and the practice of writing and reading the forum itself part of 'real life'. Since 'real life' can refer to out-of-game practices or offline practices, it would seem these activities could be considered as taking place 'in real life', however, since the practices are still game related it might also mean that they are not considered part of 'real life'. In Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) case these practices would be considered metagaming and take place on the boundary of the *magic circle*. Metagaming is still not part of 'real life' but can refer to influences 'real life' can have upon play. We could say that for Salen and Zimmerman metagaming seems to

take place *in between* the bounded off game space and 'real life'. In relation to online website or forum spaces we could ask if these spaces are placed in the 'real world' or considered part of the game space, or maybe they are not considered part of either, but are virtual and *in between*. What is clear is that metagaming practices push at the notion of a separated game space where play takes place.

As we have seen, game worlds have been contrasted to the 'real world' in terminology and this indicates a separation. The persistent fantasy environments that MMORPGs represent have been viewed as virtual worlds (Bartle 2004; Castronova 2005; Juul 2005; Kelly 2 2004; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Taylor 2005). Castronova (2005) and Kelly 2 (2004) see MMORPGs as a potential substitute for the 'real world' and discuss players spending more and more time in these worlds in terms of players 'moving' or 'migrating' to these worlds.[49] Within these worlds different rules apply, the rules of the game. The idea of these games as actual separate spaces where we can go to stimulates the perception of gaming experiences as only taking place on the screen, within these virtual worlds. Discussing video game spaces in contrast to non-video games Juul (2005), for example, points to the border between game space and world space. He describes game space of sports and board games as a subset of the space of the world, where the border is the board or the playing field outside which the game is not played. Concerning video games, however, Juul discusses game space in relation to the fictional world that is created by the game and argues that in many cases the game space takes place within the fictional world which is projected from the 'real world'. On the border between game space and world space in video games he states:

> [I]n video games, the magic circle is quite well defined since a *video game only takes place on the screen* and using input devices (mouse, keyboard, controllers), rather than in the rest of the world[.] (Juul 2005, 164-165, emphasis by me)

This quote exemplifies the idea that video games only take place in the fictional virtual world. Not only online games, but Internet in general has been regarded as a place to be apart from offline life, a different space (Markham 1998; Slater 2002; Wertheim 1999). In her book *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (1999) science writer Margaret Wertheim, for example, compares cyberspace, online space, to medieval spiritual spaces and discusses how we went from a dualistic view of space to a monistic view where the physical is considered the only space. With the coming of cyberspace however we return to a dualistic view. Cyberspace is

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[49] Although the book cover of *Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games* by R.V. Kelly 2 (2005) states that "R.V. Kelly 2 is the former head of Virtual Reality, Artifical Life, and Distance Learning Application Development at the Digital Corporation and has been building synthetic worlds for 20 years" and currently works in Honk Kong, I could not find any information about Kelly 2 to validate this.

presented as a spiritual space and offers a new mental space. Even though it is not material cyberspace does represent a real space according to Wertheim, it is a place outside physical space, one with similar and different rules where we can experiment without physical consequences. Wertheim points to limitations of a purely materialistic view of reality and argues that cyberspace makes explicit the non-physical aspects of human beings that were neglected in an era of physicalism. Although Wertheim does point out that we are physically dependent upon our bodies to exist, throughout her book she represents cyberspace as another space in contrast to the physical reality. As Slater (2002) shows these kind of representations of new media and online and offline spaces is quite common in academic literature. According to Slater, however, if we look at the practices of participants, and with an increase of ethnographical research, we will see that this distinction does not hold up to actual practices. According to Slater "It seems perfectly valid to treat the online/offline distinction as part of a transitional phase for both users and researchers." (344)

As discussed earlier in this chapter game research and practices indeed indicate there is no clear separation but instead a blurring or in-betweenness of worlds (Castronova 2005; Nieuwdorp 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Taylor 2005). As Copier (2006), for example, argues "the space of play is not a given space but is being constructed in negotiation between player(s) and the producer(s) of the game but also among players themselves." However, we have also seen that terminology still indicates a dichotomy between game world and 'the real world' which often results in a focus on the game world and an absence or downplaying of the actual physical reality of the player self. The 'real world' or 'real life' influences on the game are part of the metagame according to Salen and Zimmerman (2004). But the empirical data collected from the Steamwheedle Cartel forum shows that a player's 'real life' in fact is closely related to the gaming practice and experience. A player's context; his or her occupation, knowledge, age, family life, personality, activities, mood, geographical location and time zone are all relevant to the actual gaming practice.

In relation to players and avatars, or online users and virtual world embodiment and identification are frequently touched upon issues (Bartle 2004; Castronova 2005; Markham 1998; Taylor 2005 Turkle 1995). I do not wish to discuss embodiment practices here, but I would like to point out that when playing an MMORPG the player is more than an avatar on a screen. In their ethnographical descriptions of going online and of playing online games Markham (2004) and Taylor (2005) describe the actual practice of sitting in a room behind a desk with a computer while at the same time something is happening on the screen where a representation of themselves is active as well. Taylor (2005) talks about a "duality of

presence" when we play (109). The location of the player cannot be described in binary oppositions, players or users of online technology are online *and* offline, and engage in a physically real *and* virtually real space. These spaces are not disconnected from each other but, as the empirical data has shown, are deeply interrelated. If we aim to understand online and playing practices we need to look at actual practices of users and the situatedness of players (Copier 2005; Markham 1998; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Slater 2002). A focus on the player instead of game characteristics would lead to an acknowledgement of the duality of spaces.

A contextualization of gaming practices in the aspect of space would mean a closer look at game space and metagaming, as gaming practices are not clearly defined and separated by game space, nor is the game space a clearly bounded off space. Related to this unclear bounded off space and metagaming is the actual physical space and context of the player, or as Salen and Zimmerman (2004) phrase it "the influence of real life on a game in play" (483).

Time organization and gaming

Strongly related to the physical actuality of players is the aspect of time. Time and space are not separated but very much related aspects in relation to the gaming experience. The aspect of time has not been addressed in game research as much as the aspect of (game)space, however, it has been used to discredit the idea of boundaries initiated by the *magic circle* concept. Castronova (2005) and Taylor (2005), for example, discuss time as an economic value. The time players invest into the game is a form of labour and is used to discuss the issue of ownership and economical transactions that cross boundaries of the game world and the 'real world'. But not only the economic value of invested time shows a transgression of boundaries. The analysis of the empirical data in chapter three has shown that time is a very important aspect for players' playing experience and the way players integrate it into their gaming disrupts ideas of a clear separation between the game and the rest of the world. Playing time is linked to the location and context of the player. In *Half-Real* Juul (2005) distinguishes between 'real time' and 'fictional world time'. 'Real time' refers to the time that passes in the 'real world', the non-game world, and 'fictional world time' refers to the in-game time. The actions that are performed in games have a duality of meaning, they have a meaning as a 'real world' event and as an action in the fictional world of the game. "Additionally, since our actions take place in time, that time shares the duality of both real time *and* fictional world time." (Juul 2005, 141, emphasis in original) The link between 'real

time' and 'fictional world time' in *World of Warcraft* is especially clear in the case of seasonal times that are integrated into the game. Furthermore, time not only passes in the game world, but also in the non-game environment of the player. That this is linked to the question of where we locate the player is exemplified by the discussion in chapter three of requirements in time and dedication that certain gaming activities or communities can ask of players. As mentioned before, playing (online) computer games has become an integrated daily activity for some players (Castronova 2005; Pargman and Jakobsson 2006; Taylor 2005). Gaming as a mundane activity and requirements in time and dedication are closely linked to a players' non-gaming situation since players gaming practices have an impact on their non-gaming lives. Players sometimes (re)organize their non-gaming lives in order to accommodate for the gaming practice.

The fact that gaming can become a daily activity and that players can spend a lot of time in online environments also causes distress. Problematic behaviour or addiction to online games is often referred to as in measurements of time. However, it is not only the amount of time spend in an online world or dedicated to a game that makes behaviour problematic, but behaviour can become problematic in relation to the players' 'ordinary life' (Castronova 2005; Kelly 2 2004; Stenberg 2006)[50]. As Castronova (2005) points out concerning the issue of addiction:

> In the end, we can only judge whether presence in a virtual world is good or bad by reference to the ordinary daily life of the person making the choice to go there. For some people, Earth is where they really ought to spend their time. For others, perhaps the fantasy world *is the only decent place available*. (65, emphasis in original)

The amount of time players play is related to players' 'real life' as we have seen in the discussion of the empirical data where players frequently refer to 'real life' in relation to time issues and gaming practices. For players 'real life' is linked to how much and when they can play. Thus time is closely related to the actual gaming practices of players. In discussions concerning different play styles, such as for example around 'first' discussions, 'real life' is used normatively to remark upon the amount of time a player dedicates to the game. Discussing her findings on casual and power gamers Taylor (2005) remarks upon the oversimplified stereotyped distinction that is often made.

> The casual gamer is often seen as someone 'with a life' who invests only moderate amounts of time in a game, while the power gamer appears as an isolated and socially inept player with little 'real life' to ground him. (Taylor 2005, 70)

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[50] Daedalus Project, Nick Yee, http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/ (accessed June 24, 2007). GamerWidow.com, http://www.gamerwidow.com/aboutus.php (accessed June 24, 2007).

These stereotyped images not only occur amongst non-gamers, but players themselves hold onto these stereotypes as well and remark upon each others' 'real life' in relation to the time spend in the game. While Taylor discusses that there seem to be two different interpretations of power gamers, one linked to the minimum amount a power gamer plays and a second that argues it has more to do with how the time is spent, she states that eventually time does play some role. That a player's offline non-gaming life has an impact upon his or her gaming practices is also exemplified by female gamers explanations of the low amount of female power gamers, which has not only to do with the amount of time versus how time is spend discussion around power gamers.

> Others [female gamers], however, suggest that many women, because of domestic or work pressures, simply do not have the required amount of leisure time needed to fully embody the play style. My sense is that time definitely plays some role, especially at the high-end game where participation in raiding guilds, a natural home for the power gamer, comes with significant responsibility. The fact that many women still perform an enormous juggling act with domestic labor, social-familial responsibilities, work outside the home, and their leisure time certainly plays a part in their ability to inhabit the power-gamer play style. (Ibid. 73)

Although Taylor states that other social barriers also influence the amount of female power gamers, this example shows that time is not only related to how much players play, but also as to how players (can) play. This is similar to findings of the empirical data presented in chapter three, for example players that could not raid because of the time zone in which they lived.

A player's non-gaming life, or 'real life' or 'ordinary life', is important for how much, when and even how a player can play. In the case of *World of Warcraft* the aspect of time transgresses supposed boundaries of game space because of its play taking place in 'real time'; the transference of seasonal times into the game world; and because the very practice of playing the game is not disconnected from the rest of a player's life but one integrated and part of their lives. Contextualizing time aspects in gaming practices helps to move away from the idea that gaming experiences take place in a bounded off space and time and shows that the player is located and not separated in space and time as soon as the player starts to play.

Conclusions

While the counterpart remains unnamed, the use of terms like 'real life' by players of *World of Warcraft* suggests a separation between the online game world and an offline non-game world. The use of such terms can be placed in two pre-MMORPG networks, namely the Internet and games. In discussing Internet practices 'real life' has been used as the opposite of virtual. In the games area the use of the concept of the *magic circle* separates play from ordinary life in space and time and 'real life' or 'real world' is contrasted to play or game. In

line with the empirical findings of chapter three many game researchers move away from the *magic circle* and argue against binary distinctions because embracing binary distinctions is not helpful while discussing online gaming practices and would disregard actual activities that take place. However, the terminology used by game researchers still indicates dichotomies.

'Real' in 'real life' or 'real world' is problematic because of its normative value and possible disregarding of experiences as not real. While 'real life' is not a term commonly used by game researchers 'real world' is more commonly used in contrast to the game world. Even when 'real life' or 'real world' are not used in contrast to gaming practices theorists make use of 'everyday life', 'ordinary life' or 'daily life' to indicate non-gaming life. Playing games can, however, be mundane and part of a player's everyday life, so the use of this kind of terminology underplays actual gaming practices. In contrast to the argument that we should move away from dichotomies in discussing online gaming practices, the use of terminology such as 'real life', 'real world' or 'ordinary everyday life' indicates a separation between a game world or life and a non-game world or life. Contrasting game worlds to a non-game world is not fruitless, but a consciousness of the use of terminology and its implications is needed. What are the presupposed concepts to which we contrast the online gaming environment?

In order to account for actual gaming practices terminology and activities need to be contextualized. The empirical data of chapter three has shown that gaming is not a separated activity, instead of being separated in space and time these aspects show that non-gaming aspects of a player's life cannot be separated from gaming life but instead are interrelated. Practices of metagaming show that there is no clear bounded off game space. Furthermore, the duality of the presence of the player, as both an avatar and a physical actual person sitting behind a computer, contests a clear separation. The aspect of time is closely related to the aspect of space and the situatedness of the player. In *World of Warcraft* time transgresses the separation of game space and non-game space by transferring 'real time' and seasonal times into the game. Furthermore, the aspect of time influences when, how much and how a player can play. Aspects of space and time show that gaming is not a bounded off practice separated from non-gaming practices. Playing a game is not separated from non-gaming life. If we want to look at players experiences and the activity of gaming we need to contextualize these practices in space and time and look at the relation between gaming aspects and non-gaming aspects of players' lives.

5. Conclusions

The use of the term 'real life' in reference to online gaming practices is problematic because it implies that the online experiences are not 'real' or less 'real' than those offline. Furthermore, the use of the concept by MMORPG players often implies normative values and indicates to a separation between play and 'real life' in which the gaming experience is subordinated and separated from 'real life'. What this 'real life' exactly is, however, is never clearly discussed. Instead of trying to define characteristics of virtual gaming practices in contrast to a fundamental real, this thesis has tried to look at what this fundamental 'real life' is to which players contrast the gaming experience. In order to understand how MMORPG players construct, discuss and use the concept 'real life' empirical data of players communicating with each other has been collected from the online role-play realm forum of Steamwheedle Cartel, of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*.

This research questions clear boundaries not only by a discussion of the concept 'real life'. The forum space itself is, in game definitions, seen as a boundary case that contests a separated game space. Furthermore, the unclear outcome of persistent online games, and the role-play aspect of the role-play realm are also considered boundary cases in game definitions.

The analysis of the forum data has shown that 'real life' is a normalized concept which is frequently used in discussions in three main topic categories of the forum: role-play, instrumental and player. On the forum there are three kind of posts, those concerning players in general, those concerning role-play and posts made by Blizzard Entertainment, all of which use 'real life' and 'real world'. Role-players make use of 'real life' the same way as players in general but add an extra dimension on the immersion issue. Although the counterpart of 'real life' is never explicitly mentioned by players it seems that 'real life' is contrasted to the game world and is used in different situations, often to refer to an offline physical out-of-game non-play environment. 'Real life' holds negative connotations for players as it is that which prevents play. On the other hand, however, 'real life' is considered that which is important and play is subordinated to 'real life'. Both players and Blizzard Entertainment in their use of terminology seem to want to distinguish between a game environment and offline non-game environment. However, the very issues discussed with 'real life' and 'real world' show that there is no clear separation, but instead they show that the game and non-game environment are interrelated and influence each other. In fact, the gaming practice is very dependent upon

'real life'. Players and Blizzard Entertainment do not acknowledge this their use of terminology that indicates a separation, however behaviour and norms and values in the game world are believed to originate from 'real life' and therefore in-game behaviour can have repercussions in 'real life'. Furthermore, the role-play dimension shows that immersion into the fantasy game world is dependent upon its contrast and abstinence from 'real world', while simultaneously its credibility is dependent upon similarities to the 'real world'. The use of the concept 'real life' enforces and at the same time deconstructs a distinction between an online game environment and an offline non-game environment. The analysis of the empirical data raises questions about the usefulness of discussing online gaming experiences in binary distinctions.

The use of the concept 'real life' is not restricted to players of *World of Warcraft*. In fact, online games are placed at an intersection of two traditions in which a distinction or separation from 'real' is made; namely, the Internet and games. In Internet studies the online environment, the virtual, has been contrasted by the 'real'. In game theory the concept of the *magic circle* has contrasted and separated game worlds from the 'real world'. The role-play aspect in this research adds an extra dimension, because in role-play a distinction is made between 'out of character' and 'in character' where 'out of character' often functions as a reference to or substitute for 'real life'.

In game theory there is a move away from the strict boundaries that are implied by the concept of the *magic circle*. However, even though many game researchers argue for a move away from dichotomies when describing online gaming experiences the terminology used still indicates binary distinctions and a separation between game world and 'real world' or game world and 'ordinary, daily life'. Although game researchers do not make much use of the normative concept 'real life', 'real world' is commonly used in contrast to online gaming worlds and still includes the problematic reference to 'real' in contrast to the virtual, 'not real'. Furthermore gaming activities in contrast to 'ordinary life', 'daily life' or 'everyday life' implies that the gaming practice is not part of 'everyday life', which does not do justice to the actual gaming practices. The empirical data shows that gaming practices are incorporated in 'everyday life' and not separated from player's 'real life' or the 'real world'. Especially the aspects of space and time show that a separation of game versus non-game environment and practices disregards relationships and activities that are actually present. The situatedness of players in physical space, and the organization of a player's life are related to how much, when and how players play. Instead of being separated in space and time and from 'ordinary

life', playing online games is deeply related to player's non-gaming life and to the spatial and time context of players.

Both players and game researchers in communicating, discussing and reflecting upon online games make use of terms that indicate a separation between a game and non-game environment. However, the actual practices often described show that this separation is not as clear as the terminology used might imply. Play and players are situational and playing online games is connected to a player's 'daily life' or 'real life'. Problematic is that the use of terminology is normalized and not discussed. Concepts need to be placed in the system of relations in which they take place. Gaming activities and experiences need to be contextually and relationally framed to account for the actual practices and unclear boundaries between game and non-game.

By including empirical data from players and the conceptualization of their experiences this research has explored the relation between games and players. Through the analysis of the use of the concept 'real life' the normalized use of problematic terminology such as 'real life' and 'real world' has been questioned. Furthermore, reflecting upon conceptualizations of gaming practices in game theory using the empirical data destabilizes the concept of the *magic circle* and the notion that gaming practices take place separated from and outside player's 'daily real life'. Instead of looking at gaming practices as isolated practices and experiences indicated by binary distinctions a move towards contextualization of practices is needed.

Epilogue

During this research I have had to make a lot of choices and I came across a lot of interesting aspects, which unfortunately could not all be accounted for in this thesis.[51] However, I would like to briefly point out some issues here.

First of all, my position as a player and a researcher to the *World of Warcraft* forum. As both a player and a researcher I might fulfill the *playing researcher* for which game researcher Espen Aarseth (2003) pleads. However, this research is concerned with the forum space of WoW. While only people with a WoW account can post on the forums, and thus in general only players post at the forums, being a player does not necessarily make you a participant of the forum. Before this research I had never really kept track of or posted on the WoW forums, not as a player nor as a researcher. But I did recognize thread topics and the use of language as similar to in-game conversations and posts on guild forums and websites that I have participated in.

Secondly, I became fascinated by players' persistent use of 'real life' in their communication and descriptions of their experiences, because it implies the idea that gaming is not part of 'real life' and indicates a separation that I do not experience myself.[52] My initial research proposal was therefore more concerned with *why* players make a distinction. However, since I could not find any material on players' use of concepts such as 'real life' I became fascinated by *how* players describe their experiences. I believe this analysis serves to give a first impression as to how online players communicate about their experiences and possible distinctions between worlds. The outcomes of my research on how players use certain concepts can be used to further explore questions of *why* online players use the concepts they use, such as 'real life'.

A third issue that I would like to shortly address here is that even though gender related issues can be found in the data and I have a background in Women's Studies, this is not the focus of this research.[53] My references to players as *he* or *she* is in line with the gender

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[51] The ideas and concerns for which this thesis does not offer space have resulted in a new project: "Diary of a female gamer" (Vollenbroek, work in progress).

[52] The fact that I do not experience this distinction could (partly) be related to the fact that gaming perhaps has more serious implications for me as a part of my development in studies and work, this in contrast to many players for whom gaming has no direct, explicit connection to their work or studies.

[53] Very interesting, for example, was that in discussions of unwanted player behaviour references to the player(s) who displayed unwanted behaviour all became male gendered.

of their characters, which can be deducted from the small icons of the characters accompanying their posts.

Another issue I would like to take up is a point made clear by Markham (1998), Turkle (1995) and Wertheim (1999); the difficulty and connection of exploration of online spaces and the beliefs of the 'self'. My beliefs of the self, the self as a collection of everything I do and experience, made me fascinated by the use of the concept 'real life'. To me, playing another identity online for example is part of me in the sense that I am a person that plays another person online; it is not separated from me but an actual action and experience of my self. This is not to say that self is unchangeable and stable, rather I see self as a hybrid collection of all experiences, actions and thoughts. Even though I am uncertain what self exactly means to me, I do find it important to point out that it is this very perception of self (and the world around the self) that led me to question how players relate to their experiences and construct the concept 'real life'.

My final remark concerns my style of writing. Although I am interested in alternative ways of presenting research, and in the process of writing and knowledge production, such as for example explored by Markham (1998), it was not the aim of this research, nor did I have the time and space to pursue such a project. However, similar to Markham, I would like to remark upon the difficulty I had to deconstruct binary distinctions in language. It is easy to rely on binary distinctions when talking about game and non-game worlds, online and offline spaces, and similar dichotomies. It is hard and problematic to discuss and criticize terminology while at the same time being dependent upon terminology that indicates separations and dichotomies to discuss the issue. I have not tried to argue for new vocabulary, but instead for an increase in consciousness of the terminology we use and the implications it might carry. Placing not only our terminology in a network of relations, but contextualizing research, players, games, and activities is necessary for a better understanding of (gaming) practices.

Glossary

Alliance	The 'good' faction of *World of Warcraft*.
Azeroth	The fictional world of *World of Warcraft*.
BE	Acronym sometimes used by players to indicate the race of Bloodelfs.
Character Migration	Moving a character between realms against payment.
Class	"A term within role-playing games (including nondigital tabletop varieties) that refers to various categories of skill and/or profession." (Taylor 2005, 163). In *World of Warcraft* players can choose between the following classes: Warrior, Mage, Priest, Rogue, Druid, Paladin, Shaman, and Hunter.
Ding	A term used by players to indicate that they have gained a level.
DPS	Damage Per Second.
Epic / Epics	High valued in-game armour and weapons.
Farm / Farming	The practice of repeatedly killing computer controlled characters in order to get in-game money or materials.
'First' / 'Firsts'	Players, characters and guilds that have reached a certain level, gained a special skill, or achieved a certain goal first.
GM	Game Master, on forums also referred to as blues because their posts appear in blue.
Griefer /Griefing	"A griefer is a slang term used to describe a player in an online video game who plays the game simply to cause grief to other players through harassment."[54]
Grind / Grinding	Grinding is the practice of "Staying in the same area fighting the same types of monsters for a very long time." (Blizzard 2004).
Guild	Long-term player organized groups.
Horde	The 'evil' faction of *World of Warcraft*.
IC	In Character.
Instance	A unique copy of a special area created when a group of players enters that area. If another group of players enters the area they will enter their own copy.
IRC / mIRC	A chat program.

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[54] Wikipedia, the free encyclopdia, "Griefer", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griefing (accessed June 24, 2007).

IRL	In Real Life
Leet / l33t	"Leet (written as 31337, 1337, and l33t), or Leetspeak, is a written form of slang used primarily on the Internet, but becoming increasingly common in many online video games, which uses various combinations of alphanumerics to replace proper letters. The term itself is a degenerative form of the word "elite"."[55]
LFG	Looking For Group.
LFP	Looking For Player.
Loot	The rewards from killing computer controlled characters in the game.
Lolbois / Lolboys	Players that do not behave 'in character' or in line with the fictional world of *World of Warcraft* and are very prominent by for example making their characters jump around a lot, go around towns as naked as possible and use abbreviations and language that is not in line with the fictional world, such as 'lol' (laughing out loud).
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.
Noob	A beginner.
NPC	Non-Player Character.
OOC	Out Of Character, in writing style also ((…)).
Post	One post of one player on a forum.
PvE	Player versus Environment.
PvP	Player versus Player.
Race	"A term within role-playing games (including nondigital tabletop varieties) that refers to various species categories." (Taylor 2005, 164). In *World of Warcraft* players can choose between the following races in the Alliance faction: Dwarf, Gnome, Human , Night Elf and after *The Burning Crusade* expansion also Draenei. In the Horde faction players can choose between: Orc, Tauren, Troll, Undead and after *The Burning Crusade* expansion also Bloodelf.
Raid	"A large-scale attack on an area by a group of parties and players." (Blizzard 2004).

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[55] Wikipedia, the free encyclopdia, "Leet", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leet (accessed June 24, 2007).

Realm	A server application on which one of the many parallel versions of a MMORPG exists. Also called server or shard depending upon the game and/or player.
RL	Real Life.
RP	Role-Play.
Spec	A certain way in which players can divide points in order to improve their character's abilities.
Sticky / Stickies	A thread that will remain at the top of the forum regardless of its last reply.
SWC	Steamwheedle Cartel.
TBC	The Burning Crusade.
Thread	A collection of posts on the forum including the original post and its replies.
Tier 1	Reference to a special set of armour in *World of Warcraft*.
Ventrillo	A voice communication program.
WoW	World of Warcraft.

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