MEN BEHAVING (NOT SO) BADLY:
INTERPLAYER COMMUNICATION IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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ABSTRACT

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Because of the level of social interaction available to players, MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer On-line Role Playing Games) have become an important part of on-line culture. Their increasing sophistication and the addition of such tools as VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) have made these games attractive to an ever-expanding segment of Internet users. A common oversight in current scholarly research of MMORPGs is a lack of attention to how gaming culture affects players’ in-game relationships. To help address this gap in game studies, this thesis examines how members of an end-game guild communicate over VoIP while playing *World of Warcraft*, currently the largest MMORPG on the market. I draw on Deborah Tannen’s work on gendered speech styles and Judith Butler’s theories on the performativity of gender to examine how game culture affects the ways male players perform their gender within the game.

By focusing on a small, close-knit group of men, I hope to determine what is changing in the ways they build communities and how those constructions are shaped by the virtual environment of *World of Warcraft*. Employing a quantitative approach, I use Deborah Tannen’s studies of male linguistic behavior to establish that this group of players is using gendered speech in atypical ways. To consider the significance of these findings, I incorporate Judith Butler’s theory that gender is performative in my analysis. I argue that the nature of on-line games forces players to inhabit a postmodern self and perhaps offers a way out of a system of gender which depends on unified subjects. This increased identity flexibility challenges how gendered behavior is categorized and reveals the artificial nature of “masculine” and “feminine.” It is through the virtual environment’s challenges to identity as a unified concept that normative definitions of gender can begin to be unraveled. These games, with their potential for gender
play, perhaps provide spaces where young men can redefine masculinity. Although
postmodernists have argued for years that the self is multiple and fractured, on-line games,
especially *World of Warcraft*, are bringing this concept into the homes of millions of people
outside of academia.
To my parents—my first and greatest teachers.
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INTRODUCTION

In her 1990 text, You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, Deborah Tannen outlines her research on the different ways men and women use language. Her reason for these differences is based on the argument that men view relationships as hierarchical and their language use reflects that attitude. Women, on the other hand, emphasize maintaining equal status between speakers and use language to achieve that end. Language derives much of its meaning from the culture in which it is embedded. The close relationship between gender and language that Tannen discusses can be further illuminated by Judith Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender. In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (first published in 1990), Butler argues that gender itself is a cultural product. Individuals perform their gender according to rules defined by the society in which they live. She concludes “[t]hat the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler 136). Gender, then, is less of a biological fact and more of a socially determined concept that individuals attempt to conform to with varying degrees of success.

The Internet provides a unique environment for the study of the performativity of gender. Despite early expectations that the Internet would become a genderless utopia, the cultural aspects of gender still play a role in on-line interactions. Recently, the rise of on-line games, where players are “embodied” through their on-screen avatars, has further complicated theories about gender on the Internet. The goal of this thesis is to examine how male gamers perform their gender through language while playing the on-line game World of Warcraft.

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1 These expectations stemmed from the argument that the increasing complexity of computers would blur the boundaries separating human and machine and, in turn, challenge other “natural” binaries including male/female. One of the most well known examples of this position is Donna Haraway’s 1991 “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” Another is Sadie Plant’s “Beyond the Screens: Film, Cyberpunk, and Cyberfeminism” published in 1993.
On the eve of *World of Warcraft*’s release, industry experts were certain that the North American gaming market contained only about one million people willing to pay to play an on-line game. At about 500,000 players, *EverQuest* was considered a hit (Schiesel 1). The popularity of *Lineage* in South Korea, where on-line gaming could be considered almost a national pastime, pushed the global numbers higher, but the combined total was still less than five million players (Woodcock, “200,000+”). Released in November 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment, *World of Warcraft* changed how people both inside and outside the industry thought about on-line gaming. “The game sold out during its first store appearance, attracting more than 240,000 subscribers in less than 24 hours” (Ducheneaut et al., “Alone Together?” 407). This impressive opening was followed by steady growth. Within a year there were over four million subscribers and only two years after its release, seven million people were playing *World of Warcraft* (Woodcock, “World of Warcraft”). In January 2008, Blizzard announced that it had reached the 10 million subscriber mark, over half of whom are in North America and Europe (Blizzard, Press Release). Although *World of Warcraft*’s growth has slowed somewhat in recent months, it shows no sign of stopping.

In “Why Game Studies Now?: Gamers Don’t Bowl Alone,” Dmitri Williams calls for more investigation of on-line gaming “. . . because these networked social games are a wholly new form of community, social interaction and social phenomenon that is becoming normative faster than we have been able to analyze it, theorize it, or collect data on it” (13). While there has been work on the formation and function of on-line communities, less scholarly work has been done on game culture. This is partly due to the fact that it is only recently that there have been a significant number of gamers with computers capable of running a graphics-intensive game and with access to a high speed Internet connection. Because *World of Warcraft* was only released in
2004, there has not been enough time to conduct many in-depth scholarly studies on it. Its runaway popularity also makes it a prime candidate for investigation. The “new forms of community” that Williams called for more research on in 2006 are growing faster than anyone could have predicted.

*World of Warcraft*

*World of Warcraft* is a fantasy MMORPG (massively multiplayer on-line role-playing game) created and distributed by Blizzard Entertainment, which runs *World of Warcraft* on several servers. Players only belong to one server, so while the game and the fictional world of Azeroth are identical on all of the servers, each one is a distinct community. Unlike some computer games where time effectively stops when the player logs off the game, the *World of Warcraft* environment is constantly changing regardless of whether or not a particular player is currently connected to the game (called a “persistent environment”).

*World of Warcraft* contains many traditional fantasy elements familiar from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* including magic users, a quasi-medieval setting, and non-human (but not extra-terrestrial)\(^2\) civilizations. The world of Azeroth is divided into two opposing factions: The Horde and the Alliance. The Alliance contains many of the traditionally “good” races such as Humans, Night Elves, and Dwarves while the Horde side includes the Undead, the violent Trolls, and the Orcs. Blizzard went to great lengths to make sure that both factions had heroes and villains, however. The game’s detailed back-story reveals that despite having fought alongside the Horde in the recent past, many members of the Alliance races consider themselves intellectually and culturally superior, an attitude which has justified racist behavior. Although the two sides share the same world, the game is designed to prevent communication between the factions. The Horde and the Alliance have separate cities, and if a player wanders into one of the

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\(^2\) The spacefaring Draenei are an exception to this; however, the majority of the playable races are native to Azeroth.
opposing faction’s capital cities, he or she will be attacked by the city guards. Additionally, players can not use the in-game text channel to communicate with members of the opposite faction. They can only use emotes—commands that make a player’s character perform certain actions. For example, typing “/dance” will make the avatar dance. These communication barriers help ensure that the two opposing factions are actually oppositional.

In World of Warcraft players create characters and attempt to improve these characters by earning in-game experience, obtaining items, and learning in-game skills. One player can create several characters and pursue different goals with each one. Not all characters are created equal, however. Players can choose from among a variety of races, classes, and professions.3 Some races are particularly good at one skill but weak at another. Tauren, for example, are stronger but less agile than Night Elves.

![Figure 1. Night Elf Male and Female; Tauren Male and Female.](image)

3 Races: Draenei, Dwarf, Gnome, Human, and Night Elf (Alliance); Blood Elf, Orc, Tauren, Troll, and Undead (Horde).
Classes: Druid, Hunter, Mage, Paladin, Priest, Rogue, Shaman, Warlock, and Warrior.
Professions: Alchemy, Blacksmithing, Cooking, Enchanting, Engineering, First Aid, Fishing, Jewelcrafting, Herbalism, Leatherworking, Mining, Skinning, and Tailoring.

4 For examples of avatars from all of the playable races, please see Appendix A.
For each of the races, players can choose a male or a female avatar. Some races, such as the Night Elves, conform to normative beauty standards. Others, like the Tauren, do not. This does not mean that the Horde is populated entirely by monsters. Although members of the Horde, Blood Elves of both genders would not seem out of place walking a high-fashion runway. Between them, the ten playable races permit players to choose from among a wide range of avatar body styles.

Class choice allows for even further specialization. Players can choose from among nine classes, although not all classes are available to all races. Each class has its own abilities and drawbacks. Mages, for example, can use powerful spells to defeat their opponents from a distance but are vulnerable at close quarters. As players progress in the game, they obtain more class abilities such as stronger attacks or better healing spells. Professions (such as alchemy, mining, and herbalism) are specific skills sets that players can learn that are not tied to their race or class. Some professions are a better fit for some classes then others. Mages tend to use numerous potions to enhance their abilities and so mages usually specialize in alchemy in order to avoid buying all of their potions from in-game vendors. Like the class skills, as players progress through the game, their expertise in their professions also increases.

Characters advance by gaining in-game experience. Experience, or “XP,” can be earned by killing monsters (more difficult monsters are worth more experience), discovering new areas, and completing quests. Killing monsters and completing quests frequently come with additional rewards (called “loot”), such as money, food, or tools and weapons that the player can use or sell. Quests are the driving force behind much of the game. A player may need to kill a certain number of monsters, gather supplies, or deliver a message in order to complete the quest. Quests, which are given by NPC’s (non-player characters), are often linked together into “quest-chains.”
In a quest-chain, a player may have to take a message from one NPC to another. Upon delivery, the second NPC asks the player to investigate a problem mentioned in the message. The problem turns out to be larger than anyone realized and the player is called upon to lend a hand (yet another quest). The player not only receives experience and loot as a reward for successful completion of every quest in the chain, he or she also gains experience and picks up valuable items along the way by killing monsters and exploring new locations.

When a player earns enough experience, he or she reaches the next level. In many video games, reaching a new level means that the player accessed new game content. In *World of Warcraft*, levels can be thought of as a way of measuring a character’s strength and abilities. A higher level character will be able to defeat stronger monsters and have access to more powerful abilities than a lower level character. Currently, the highest level a player can reach in *World of Warcraft* is seventy.

Players interact with each other in real time and can trade items, compete against each other, or work together towards a common goal. Players can also form or join permanent associations called guilds. The functional purpose of these guilds is to provide a player with a network of other players to help him or her complete difficult tasks. Members of the same guild often become friends and guilds frequently serve as social networks. Although many tasks can be completed alone, some are too large for just one player to handle. These larger tasks frequently take the form of “raids.” Having a pool of trusted players to complete raids with is one of the driving forces behind the creation of guilds. In a raid, a group of players attempts to kill all the monsters in a particular dungeon. The number of players needed depends on the dungeon. Some only require five players while some require as many as twenty-five. Throughout the dungeon are more difficult monsters called “bosses.” Bosses are much more powerful than the other
monsters and usually require a coordinated effort by all of the raid members in order to be defeated. Each dungeon and boss is different and so each requires a different strategy. Because bosses are so difficult to fight, they usually drop\(^5\) higher quality items. The more difficult the boss, the more rare and valuable the loot. Although there are dungeons designed for all players above level fifteen, the dungeons accessible only to level seventy players are the most difficult and contain the best loot. At this level of the game, a team can spend several weeks trying to defeat a particular boss or a particular dungeon. Even after they are successful, they do not necessarily move on to next dungeon and never return. A boss drops only a few items each time it is killed, and since they are so rare, demand usually exceeds supply. The same boss may drop different items each time and individual items are usually suited for a particular type of character. These rare items usually can not be traded among players, so if an item for healers drops, the healers must decide who gets it, knowing full well that it may be weeks before that item drops again. A group of players may continually raid the same dungeon (called “farming”) in order to obtain items for all of the players in the team.

Players communicate with each other by either typing messages back and forth in-game or by communicating verbally through third-party VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) servers. It is important to note that the text communication channels are built into the game by Blizzard Entertainment and are monitored by it. The VoIP servers, however, are independent of World of Warcraft and are usually owned and operated by a guild that pays a subscription fee to the company providing the VoIP service.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) When a monster is defeated, it “drops” its loot. The term derives from the idea that the monster was carrying the items and, since it is now dead, the player can take the monster’s belongings. This term is a borrowed from earlier games (when the opponents tended to be humans) and is used despite the fact that a real bear would probably not carry armor around the forest with it.

\(^6\) Although Blizzard has recently implemented in-game VoIP, many guilds prefer to use third-party servers.
Heaven and Earth

For this project, I focus on the end-game, Alliance guild Heaven and Earth on the RP (role playing) server Farstriders. Blizzard runs *World of Warcraft* on three different types of servers: Normal/Player versus Environment (PvE), Role Playing (RP), and Player versus Player (PvP). In the first two, players can only be attacked by players of the opposing faction if they have signaled that they would like to engage in combat (called “flagging”). On PvP servers, players are only safe from attack in the cities and in areas designed for new players to learn the game (called “starter areas”). Once outside of these zones, they can be attacked by players of the opposing faction at any time. Although PvE and RP servers are similar in many respects, members of RP servers usually play “in character.” That is, they assume a fictional identity and interact with other players as that persona. Although Farstriders is an RP server and there are many members who role play, there are also many who do not. The amount of role playing is usually decided by each guild individually. Some guilds expect their members to be in character whenever they are logged in; some encourage but do not require role playing; and some, like Heaven and Earth, choose to focus on other aspects of the game.

Farstriders is also a relatively young server. Due to *World of Warcraft’s* popularity, Blizzard frequently makes additional servers available to relieve population pressures on existing servers. Farstriders first came on-line in January of 2007. Because Farstriders is fairly new, it does not have as many members as some of the older servers. This combined lack of players and lack of time means that the server as a whole has not progressed through as much of the game as older servers such as Tichondrius. Members of Farstriders have yet to see some of the end-game content that players on other servers saw soon after its release.

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7 Players can transfer characters between servers if they choose. This usually involves paying a small fee and waiting twenty-four hours for Blizzard to transfer their account. When Blizzard opens up new servers, it usually offers free transfers to players willing to make the move.
One of the most ingenious aspects of World of Warcraft’s design is its ability to appeal to many different types of players. For new or casual players, it features an intuitive interface and quests that give clear direction and goals. When a player reaches level seventy and can begin exploring end-game content, it is almost as if he or she has begun a whole new game.

Ducheneaut et al. determined in “Building an MMO with Mass Appeal: A Look at Gameplay in World of Warcraft,” that reaching level seventy requires approximately 400 hours of play time on average (289). The players at this stage are often described as “hard-core,” or extremely dedicated, gamers. While these players appreciate the easy to use game controls, they usually bring years of gaming experience with them and are looking for content that will challenge their abilities. The quests and dungeons at this stage are notoriously difficult and a guild must have some of the best players on the server to have any hope of completing the raid. Guilds, such as Heaven and Earth, which focus on content and challenges accessible only to level seventy players are known as “end-game guilds.” Although there are quests and new abilities that level seventy players can work towards, at this stage the focus is primarily on raiding.

Founded on December 15, 2004, Heaven and Earth has built a strong reputation. Heaven and Earth is currently the top ranked guild on the server (“US: Farstriders”) and is frequently the first on the server to kill a boss (called a “server first”). While its standing is not as strong worldwide due to a variety of factors, in five instances it has been among the first one hundred guilds to kill a specific boss. Most notably, it was the eleventh guild in the world to kill Nalorakk (“Heaven and Earth”).

In order to maintain this elite status, Heaven and Earth, like many end-game guilds, requires that potential raiding members formally apply and go through a probationary period.

8 Guild and server rankings are constantly changing. Heaven and Earth held this rank during my study.

9 Nalorakk (11th), Halazzi (45th), Akil’zon (80th), Jan’alai (92nd), and Hex Lord Malacrass (95th).
before they are officially accepted. Raiding party slots are rare due to a variety of factors. Game mechanics limit the number of players who can be in a dungeon at one time. Additionally, raids require a variety of players (mages, warriors, hunters, etc.), so while there may be 25 openings in a raiding party, only three might be for mages. Heaven and Earth usually has more than one team working on a dungeon, and there is more than one dungeon available, but raid slots are still scarce. There are usually more applications for a raiding group than there are openings. Joining Heaven and Earth as a non-raiding member is usually much easier, and many players join the guild with the intention of establishing contacts and having their foot in the door when a raiding slot becomes available.

Heaven and Earth divides its membership into ranks: Lord, Veteran, Crusader, Knight, Initiate, and Errant. The first four ranks contain the primary raiding members. In addition to being raiders, Lords and Veterans are also the guild’s leadership team (or “Council”). Initiates are potential raiders during their probationary period. Errants are the non-raiding members of the guild. Errants include those who are too low-level to participate in raids, players who are unable to commit to the raiding schedule, or friends and family of other guild members.

Although Heaven and Earth is made up of extremely dedicated players, the guild’s leadership emphasizes a “family-friendly” atmosphere—a trait noted by virtually all those interviewed. This does not mean that there are no off-color jokes (these are predominantly men in their twenties and thirties, after all) but rather reflects an attempt to create an environment where a variety of people feel comfortable. Additionally, one of the most important aspects that the leaders look for in a potential applicant is maturity. This trait is especially key in potential raiding party members, but it is expected from all guild members. Although there is no rigid definition of “maturity,” it is usually used to indicate willingness to work with others and respect
for different opinions. When asked what they hoped other guilds thought of Heaven and Earth, none of the Council members interviewed mentioned the guild’s raiding reputation. Instead, one stated, “I think that people outside of the guild know that if you run with somebody in Heaven and Earth, you’re going to get a quality individual to run with. You know that they’re going to be respectful and you know that they’re going to be mature. . . .” (Player F). Heaven and Earth seems to have managed to balance the discipline required to successfully navigate end-game content and the awareness that the game is something that people do to relax and to have fun.

**Project Goals**

Although the Internet is not a genderless utopia, it does (especially in the case of on-line games) allow for more gender play than is possible in the real world.\(^\text{10}\) In *World of Warcraft*, players can choose almost all aspects of their avatar’s identity including gender, physical attributes, and abilities. They can also construct more than one avatar at a time, which potentially allows players to explore multiple identities simultaneously.

The inability of players to create a gender-neutral character can be seen as an attempt to reinscribe gender on the virtual body; however, choosing to play a male or female avatar has no affect on in-game abilities. A female Rogue has access to the same range of abilities as a male Rogue, and the same rule applies to racial and professional abilities. Avatar gender is a matter of personal preference. Both genders are also equally attractive (or equally unattractive in the case of some Horde races), so choosing a particular gender does not give a player an appearance-based advantage. One must also consider the ways in which an avatar’s gender intersects with racial differences in the game. In many ways a hulking female Tauren can be seen as more masculine than an effeminate, male Blood Elf. She has more muscles and is a more intimidating

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\(^{10}\) Although “real world” is a highly problematic term, it is a widely accepted way to differentiate between the digital world of the game and the physical world of the player. I use it here for the sake of clarity.
presence than the delicately modeled Blood Elf. While the avatars are marked by gender, the examples in Figure 1 also reveal that neither gender posses what many consider the ultimate signifier of gendered difference—the phallus. These blurrings of gender boundaries are further complicated by the fact that there also appears to be little in-game social stigma attached to gender switching (males playing female avatars, for example). These elements may filter out many of the biological markers of gender and allow a researcher to focus on those produced by culture.

The goal of this project is to examine how men perform their gender through language use while playing World of Warcraft. Both Tannen and Butler focus on how gender is expressed through language, but they work at the problem from different perspectives. Tannen’s research examines the effects of gender on language use. She argues that because men focus on maintaining status, they are less likely to admit fault or weakness and more likely to phrase requests as orders. Women, however, focus on building relationships through language, which is easier to do if everyone is of equal status. According to Tannen, they tend to phrase requests as suggestions and think little of admitting fault or weakness since establishing dominance in the group is not their goal. This research provides a framework to examine gendered linguistic behavior. The presence or absence of expected patterns indicates how the game culture may be shaping how players perform their gender.

Tannen’s work can help detect shifts in how gender is expressed through language, but in order to understand the effects of this shift, how language itself shapes gender needs to considered as well. In Gender Trouble, Butler investigates how bodies become gendered subjects. She argues that what it means to be male or female is a cultural construction which is expressed

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11 All examples are shown without clothes and wearing only their game-imposed underwear. In other words, this is as naked as the avatars can be.
through language. Drawing on Lacan’s theories of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, Butler argues that we become individuals when we acquire language, thus individuals are always already gendered subjects. Since gender is not necessarily a biological fact, individuals perform their gender according to culturally determined rules. These performances take the form of a series of repetitive acts. This constant citing of the “rules” of gender both reinforces their cultural legitimacy and constantly reinscribes gender on the body. Gender, then, is not a “fact of nature” but a fact of culture, and “[i]f the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can neither be true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (Butler 136). Because individuals do not exist outside of language, it is impossible to bypass gender as a concept. Culture changes, however, which means that there is an inherent flexibility to how gender is performed. Challenges to the underlying concept of a “primary and stable identity” are likely to reveal this flexibility and reveal shifts in how subjects perform their gender.

Although Butler is usually associated with feminism, her work challenges the social constructions of both genders. In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel calls for a redefinition of what it means to “be a man.” He argues that “...the traditional way that men had defined their manhood—against the other who was excluded from full humanity by being excluded from those places where men were real men” is deeply flawed (Kimmel 185). As various equality movements have gained momentum, men have been less and less able to define their manhood by excluding others. These challenges have revealed the drawbacks of traditional gender roles for both men and women, which demand that young men strive for an impossible ideal of manliness. Not only is such a pursuit doomed to failure, it ultimately fails to fulfill the
desires of many men who wish to be involved and loving parents, sons, brothers, friends, and lovers. Rather than an attack on men and male society, “[g]ender equality is good for children, it’s good for women, and, it turns out, it’s good for men as well” (Kimmel 257). The Internet, with its potential for gender play, perhaps provides a realm where young men can redefine masculinity. By focusing on a small, close-knit group of men, I hope to determine what, if anything, is changing in the ways in which they build friendships and communities and how those constructions are shaped by the virtual environment of World of Warcraft.

My goal is to combine Butler’s theory that gender is performative with Tannen’s research on how gender affects language use to determine if these players are performing their genders in a different way than they might in the real world. Building on existing research on gaming culture, Tannen’s work provides an analytical framework to identify the use of gendered linguistic patterns in the players’ speech which can then be interpreted through Butler’s theory of performativity. Although the scope of my project is limited, if these players are performing their gender differently, it opens up exciting possibilities for future research.

Research Plan

In this study, I examine how members of Heaven and Earth communicate over VoIP while playing World of Warcraft, focusing specifically on raiding. Using a quantitative approach, I look at their use of gendered communication styles and if they follow expected patterns of male linguistic behavior as defined by Tannen. I combine this quantitative approach with player interviews and attempt to answer the following questions.

Q1: How do men use language to construct social networks while playing the MMORPG World of Warcraft?

Q2: Do members of Heaven and Earth follow the male linguistic patterns outlined by Tannen in You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation?
Q3: How do the linguistic patterns used by players intersect with Butler’s discussion of the performativity of gender? How does the lack of physical bodies affect the way players perform their gender?

Q4: How does the game and game culture affect players’ behavior patterns?

**Literature Review**

As Mel White notes in “Reframed Relationships: MMORPGs and Societies,” early research on gaming culture seemed unable to break away from societal prejudices towards gamers. Games, as well as fantasy literature (and science fiction to a lesser extent), were seen as activities more suitable for children. Adults who not only played games, but games where they pretended to be fantasy characters, were perceived as having social and psychological problems. This led to an “Us vs. Them” relationship between researchers and gamers; however, this attitude is rarely encountered in academia today. Sherry Turkle was one of the first academic researchers to depart from this approach and study Internet communities from an insider’s perspective. She joined several MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) and gathered first-hand knowledge about on-line games and the people who played them. In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, published in 1995, Turkle explores the relationship between humans and computers. She argues that the on-line self is quintessentially postmodern because it is possible to be in multiple virtual places at once and to be a different “person” in each one. “In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along” (Turkle 10). This self-invention does not lead to a complete abandonment of real world differences such as gender and race, but Turkle points out that “[a]t a certain point, traditional categories for sorting things out seem inadequate” (230). In other words, while gender still exists on the Internet, the ability to have multiple selves helps separate the self from the (gendered) body. While many of Turkle’s arguments are still relevant today, the
Internet, and especially on-line games, has undergone rapid development in the intervening
decade. *World of Warcraft* players are no long creating virtual selves in text-based MUDs; they
are creating virtual bodies that inhabit a three-dimensional game world.

Like Turkle, Susan Herring joined the virtual community she studied in her article
“Gender Differences in Computer-Mediated Communication: Bringing Familiar Baggage to the
New Frontier.” Published only a year before *Life on the Screen*, Herring used linguistic analysis
to study gendered communication patterns on the Internet. Her analysis of computer-mediated
academic discussion lists revealed that many gendered language practices had made the
transition to the new medium. Most notably, men attempted to dominate on-line conversations
by flaming (aggressive, personal attacks) which tended to silence women who were more likely
to focus on building connections than on attempting to win the argument. Also like Turkle’s
work, many of Herring’s conclusions are no longer relevant due to rapid social changes on the
Internet. While flaming does still exist, it is no longer prevalent, in part because such practices
are frowned upon by Internet users. Although Herring notes this trend in 2004’s “Slouching
Toward the Ordinary: Current Trends in Computer-Mediated Communication,” she focuses on
behavior in text communication and does not consider the role of VoIP in on-line interactions.

Although the flaming behavior noted by Herring in 1994 may be less common, David
Gefen and Catherine Ridings12 argue that gendered communication styles still exist on the
Internet. They examined several virtual communities to determine how much members valued
building rapport versus obtaining factual information. Their findings indicated that “[w]omen,
significantly more than men, came to the virtual community to get and to give social support”
(Gefen and Ridings 86). Although men also seek support in on-line communities, they tend to do

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12 David Gefen and Catherine M. Ridings: “If You Spoke as She Does, Sir, Instead of the Way You Do: A
Sociolinguistics Perspective of Gender Differences in Virtual Communities.”
so in communities that are predominantly male. The researchers theorize that this is because men feel more comfortable, and are therefore more likely to share personal information, with people who communicate like them. In other words, men in these virtual communities are looking to establish relationships with others, but they are still using gendered communication styles among themselves. The focus of Gefen and Ridings’s research is on asynchronous bulletin board communities, however, and they do not examine how gender informs virtual community formation in MMORPGs.

Because synchronous on-line communication is a relatively recent phenomenon, much of the research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) focuses on asynchronous forms of communication. There appears to be a split among researchers over whether the advantages of CMC outweigh the disadvantages. In “Relational Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication: Experimental Observations over Time,” Joseph Walther argues that these differences may stem from the fact that, given the slower rate of message exchange in CMC, studies may have compared the two mediums too early in the process. He determined that “FtF [Face to Face] was not more intimate and sociable than CMC over time” (Walther 197). He argues that, although conversations take longer, CMC allows users to participate at their convenience which means that they are less rushed. Exchanges of personal information are also less distracting because they do not interrupt work in progress and could be integrated more seamlessly into the conversation. This is supported by Jonassen and Kwon in “Communication Patterns in Computer Mediated Versus Face-to-Face Group Problem Solving” who argue that asynchronous CMC gave users time to craft and reflect on a response. If a user was upset by another group member’s statement, for example, he or she could take time to formulate a calm
reply. Because VoIP is synchronous, many of the CMC advantages noted by these researchers may not apply to it.

Relatively little research has been done on the use of VoIP in MMORPGs. This is due, in part, to the fact that it is only recently that there have been enough users with Internet connections fast enough to support both on-line gaming and synchronous voice communication. This lack of research is noted by Greg Wadley, Martin Gibbs and Peter Brenda in a paper presented at the Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment in December 2007. In “Speaking in Character: Using Voice-Over-IP to Communicate within MMORPGs,” the researchers study three group of players who used VoIP while playing Dungeons and Dragons Online and World of Warcraft. The researchers relied on interviews and diaries that the players kept of their experiences and thoughts while using VoIP. While useful, player recollections will only reveal behaviors they were conscious of and can be especially problematic in studying how gender affects behavior in fast-paced, stressful situations such as raiding.

In order to understand game communities and cultures more fully, it is necessary to also consider what leads to the success or failure of real world communities. One of the most well-known examples of scholarly work on real world communities is Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, published in 2000. In this text, Putnam examines trends in volunteering, running for public office, belonging to clubs, entertaining at home, attending church, voting, membership in neighborhood associations, etc. and determines that after a heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, Americans have increasingly opted out of community life. He argues that this lack of involvement has had a detrimental effect on the nation. One of the most notable benefits of a closely knit community is the creation of what Putnam calls a “climate of general reciprocity.” Put simply, people in involved communities are
more likely to do kind things for one another because they know that the favor will be returned down the road, although it is likely to come from someone other than the person they helped. A decline in community interactions causes a subsequent decline in “general reciprocity.” Although Putnam is not without his detractors, their critiques tend to focus on whether or not Putnam has correctly identified the problem\(^\text{13}\) or aspects of his proposed solutions,\(^\text{14}\) rather than on his analysis of what makes a successful community.

Although Putnam does discuss on-line communities in *Bowling Alone*, as Paul Starr points out in “The Public Vanishes,” he does not devote a significant amount of time to them. This may be due, in part, to Putnam’s focus on events that occurred before the Internet gained widespread acceptance among Americans. While these technologies are still relatively young, the intervening years should give a project conducted now enough perspective to get a sense of how on-line communities function. In a nod to Putnam, James Scott and Tomas Johnson examine on-line communities in their article “Bowling Alone but Online Together: Social Capital in E-Communities.” They focus on the ways in which on-line communities can help create or maintain real world communities by allowing people to find others who share their interests and build relationships both within and between real world groups. Their focus on real world relationships, however, prevents them from focusing on how social capital is created and maintained within completely virtual communities.

*World of Warcraft* is not the first MMORPG to garner attention, although it is perhaps the most successful. Research on on-line games tends to fall into two broad categories. The first is

\(^{13}\) For a critique see “Inaccurate, Exceptional, One-Sided or Irrelevant? The Debate about the Alleged Decline of Social Capital and Civic Engagement in Western Societies” by Dietland Stolle and Mark Hooghe. Claude S. Fisher, however, supports Putnam in “Ever-More Rooted Americans.”

\(^{14}\) Peter Hallberg and Joshua Lund discuss the impact of Putnam’s solutions on race relations in “The Business of Apocalypse: Robert Putnam and Diversity.”
research designed to understand the game from a computer science perspective in order to make better games. The second is a much smaller group of studies that take a more philosophical approach and seek to learn how games shape players’ identities and realities. The first group is characterized by such studies as Chen et al.’s work on how social interaction with other players affects the gaming experience,15 Laura Ermi’s and Frans Mäyrä’s analysis of what characteristics make some games more immersive than others,16 and “Player Dynamics in Massively Multiplayer Online Games” (by Zhuang et al.) which uses player behavior on *World of Warcraft* to help game designers determine how to configure game hardware and software for optimal performance. In many of these studies, player data is gathered using automated programs, or “bots,” that simply record a character’s location, activity, and physical and racial attributes. Little, if any, interactions with players occur. Such research can determine what a player is doing but can not determine why with any certainty. “Game Design and Meaningful Play” by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman seeks to address this question. Although their study is targeted towards helping game designers understand why some games succeed and some fail, the authors also discusses the concept of “meaningful play.” They argue that “play and games, which have been maligned in recent history as trivial and frivolous, are in fact at the very center of what makes us human” (Salen and Zimmerman 59). Games provide an avenue to explore what it means to be human.

The philosophical approach is used by authors such as Jos de Mul who argues in “The Game of Life: Narrative and Ludic Identity Formation in Computer Games” that the self is constructed through narrative. His article explores the idea that, in many ways, our idea of who

15 Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen, Henry Been-Lirn Duh, Priscilla Siew Koon Phuah, and Diana Zi Yan Lam: “Enjoyment or Engagement? Role of Social Interaction in Playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs).”

we are is based on the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. MMORPGs reveal this relationship by making the player both the agent and the recipient of the game narrative. This notion of dual creation is further elaborated by Joost Raessens in “Computer Games as Participatory Media Culture.” He argues that the player’s in-game choices determine what type of game he or she will play and, given the size of some MMORPGs, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a player to experience all possible narratives. While this game feature parallels real life, the gamer is always aware of the constructed nature of the story and thus the constructed nature of all stories, including the ones we tell ourselves. This awareness has an effect on society, as noted by Douglas Rushkoff in his celebratory 2005 article “Renaissance Now! The Gamers’ Perspective.” Rushkoff argues that our society is currently undergoing a shift similar to the one that occurred during the Renaissance. He states that, at its heart, the Renaissance was about changes in the way people viewed their world and how they related to reality. He claims that our society is currently undergoing a similar shift. MMORPGs require players to immerse themselves in worlds that are real in the sense that events happen which have effects on the real world but unreal in the ways in which they can be molded and shaped. This “open source” approach to reality means “. . . that gamers will be the next to steer the direction of our renaissance, and that they may have entirely better results. For, unlike businessmen or even politicians, gamers know that the reality they are engineering isn’t real” (Rushkoff 420). Although the articles in this second category are closer to what is being proposed in this thesis, they focus on individual players’ interaction with MMORPGs and do not consider the effects of a malleable reality on gendered behavior within the game world.

No study of MMORPGs in general, and *World of Warcraft* specifically, could overlook the immense amount of data complied by Nick Yee’s *Daedalus Project*, which displays the
results of surveys of more than 30,000 gamers. Yee not only collected demographic data, he solicited comments from the players as well. The topics cover such diverse areas as the relationship between avatar and identity, social ties both in and out of game, and MMORPG addiction. His data confirm many things that gamers already knew: namely, that few, if any of them, conform to the gamer stereotype. Most gamers are not teenagers, around half work full time, and many are married with children (Yee, “Player Demographics”). His work provides a wealth of information for MMORPG researchers, but differs from the project proposed here in two ways. The first is that Yee’s base in computer science means that he uses a more data-centered rather than culture-centered approach. His use of players’ written responses alleviates this to some extent, but his focus remains more on what the players are doing rather then why. The second difference is that he relies on player reported data. As such, his data, while extremely interesting and informative, would not be able to detect behavior that players are unaware they are doing. How individuals the construction and performance of gender is largely an unconscious process, so player surveys would be unable to paint a full picture of gendered behavior in MMORPGs.

Ducheneaut et al. attempt to avoid this problem by gathering data directly from the game world rather than relying on player reports. In a pair of studies, Ducheneaut et al. took an electronic census of several different World of Warcraft servers over a period of several months. In “Building an MMO with Mass Appeal: A Look at Gameplay in World of Warcraft,” the researchers focus on player demographics—avatar gender, race, class, play time, and faction (Horde or Alliance). They conclude that newer players prefer “pretty” characters and theorize that the lack of players choosing “helper” classes, such as healers, is due to many gamers’ reluctance to play what could be considered a secondary or subordinate role. Their second study,
“‘Alone Together?’ Exploring the Social Dynamics of Massively Multiplayer Online Games,” examined play time, grouping patterns, and guild membership. The data indicates that players spend significant portions of time alone, rather than in groups. The researchers argue that, despite player reports that they are attracted by the social aspects of the game, there does not seem to be much socializing occurring. They conclude “... that WoW’s [World of Warcraft] subscribers tend to be ‘alone together:’ they play surrounded by others instead of playing with them” (Ducheneaut et al., “Alone Together?” 410). The drawbacks of relying too heavily on electronic census data is noted by Nardi and Harris in “Strangers and Friends: Collaborative Play in World of Warcraft,” whose data comes from in-game experiences and player interviews. They argue that although players may not be grouped17 with each other, many players are communicating with friends and guildmates via in-game text or VoIP. Nardi and Harris also note that many players form fleeting connections in the form of beneficial spells cast on a passerby, unsolicited help killing a difficult monster, and providing directions. Such actions are usually undertaken without any expectations on the part of the giver, forming a climate of general reciprocity. Although not quantifiable, such behavior indicates that World of Warcraft players are not really “alone together” but are forming social networks in a variety of ways. Nardi and Harris’s approach is more “hands-on” than other studies, but their main goal is to learn how game mechanics foster or inhibit community formation. They are moving closer to answering the “why” question, but their focus is on computer code rather than on culture.

17 “Grouping” is an in-game function that allows players to form temporary parties. The group has access to a private text channel, a loot distribution system can be created, and players can more easily monitor their companions’ status.
Mel White’s “Reframed Relationships: MMORPGs and Societies”\textsuperscript{18} perhaps comes the closest to the project proposed here. He investigates the creation of the self in on-line relationships and notes that “[i]n this strange borderland between reality and unreality, the player sees others as avatars instead of the person at the computer keyboard” (White 88). This borderland state means that players are more likely to play with the concept of identity and be more accepting of identity play in others. He also considers the impact of game culture on player behavior and argues that the players themselves, rather than Blizzard, tend to create and enforce cultural rules. Taking advantage of another player is not against Blizzard’s End User License Agreement or Terms of Use, but a gamer who does so repeatedly will soon find that his reputation precedes him and it will be difficult to join or remain in a guild, a PvP team, or simply assemble a group of players for a cooperative task. White’s study, however, gives a broad overview of \textit{World of Warcraft} and does not focus on any area or guild specifically. It is designed to give the non-specialist a basic understanding of how on-line communities are formed. As such, its theoretical framework is not very rigorous and it remains focused on surface phenomenon.

\textsuperscript{18} This essay is part of \textit{The Battle for Azeroth: Adventure, Alliance and Addiction}. While an interesting collection, it is not designed for an academic audience. Please see \textit{Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader} (Eds. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg), forthcoming from MIT Press, for recent scholarly research on \textit{World of Warcraft}.\textsuperscript{2}
METHODOLOGY

A common oversight in current scholarly research of MMORPGs is a lack of attention to how gaming culture affects players. In literary studies, this would be akin to studying how books are made but not how novels affect readers. While book making is an important area of research, it is not the only one. To help address this gap in game studies, this thesis will examine the interaction of game culture via male players’ language use and how those players perform their gender. Deborah Tannen’s work will be used to establish that this group of players is using gendered speech in atypical ways. To consider the significance of these findings, I will incorporate Butler’s theories of performativity in my analysis of the data.

Research Questions

Q1: How do men use language to construct social networks while playing the MMORPG World of Warcraft?

Q2: Do members of Heaven and Earth follow the male linguistic patterns outlined by Tannen in You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation?

Q3: How do the linguistic patterns used by players intersect with Butler’s discussion of the performativity of gender? How does the lack of physical bodies affect the way players perform their gender?

Q4: How does the game and game culture affect players’ behavior patterns?

Subject Selection

World of Warcraft is currently the largest MMORPG with 10 million subscribers worldwide (Blizzard, Press Release). That number is especially remarkable given that World of Warcraft was only released in November 2004. Gamers are embracing the postmodern self en masse by creating alternate identities (sometimes more than one at once) and spending significant amounts of time interacting with others as those identities. Although postmodernists have argued for years that the self is multiple and fractured, on-line games, especially World of Warcraft...
*Warcraft*, are bringing this concept into the homes of millions of people far removed from academia.

The Farstriders server, like many others, has more than one end-game guild, including Heaven and Earth and Miscommunication. This study focuses on the top-ranked Heaven and Earth, and membership in this guild, especially in the raiding ranks, is prized. Although the scope of this project is limited, by focusing on these elite players I hope to detect the behaviors and attitudes considered successful, and therefore desirable, by the *World of Warcraft* community.

Many MMORPGs are played predominately by men and *World of Warcraft* is no exception. Yee’s research indicates that 84% of *World of Warcraft* players are male (Yee, “WoW Gender-Bending”). Real life demographics, however, are not necessarily indicative of the in-game gender patterns. Only 65% of *World of Warcraft* avatars are male which means that half of all female avatars are played by men (Yee, “WoW Gender Bending”). These differences point to possible shifts in how gender is conceived of in these virtual worlds. These departures from normative gender roles problematize definitions of “feminine” and “masculine” behaviors within the game world. In *World of Warcraft*, male/female is no longer a simple binary but a complex, ever-shifting relationship. Because Heaven and Earth focuses on content accessible only to players who have put in the necessary hours to reach level seventy, these players are likely to be the most affected by this fracturing of the normative gender system. Determining how these players are performing their gender may indicate larger shifts in how game culture defines masculinity.
Procedure

I installed *World of Warcraft* and played it for several months prior to starting my study. Although by no means an expert player, my time in the game allowed me to gain a first-hand understanding of it. I also joined my target guild and was able to become familiar with the various communication options (both in and out of the game) available to the players. I grouped with other players (a two-person and a five-person group) and worked on completing joint tasks in order to familiarize myself with the different playing strategies needed for solo-play verses group-play.

I first announced my project on the guild’s message board. The announcement explained the project and my goals and included instructions for how players could participate. I also made an announcement prior to a large raid in order to answer questions and encourage players to take part in the study. To participate in the recordings, players needed to e-mail me a consent form. The guild’s VoIP program, Ventrillo, allowed me to mute individuals so that I did not accidentally record a player who did not want to participate in the study.

The first stage of my study was to record players who were using the guild’s VoIP server during raids accessible only to level seventy characters. I recorded and transcribed two ten-person raids in Karazhan in the late winter and early spring of 2008. Each of these raid lasted for several hours. To ensure that any patterns I noted in these raids held true in other circumstances, I also recorded a larger (twenty-five-person) raid of Serpentshrine Cavern in March 2008.19 All raid recordings were transcribed in full, and differences as well as similarities were noted and are discussed in the Analysis section.

As a member of Heaven and Earth, I had access to the guild’s in-game text chat, its VoIP server, and its message board. It also allowed other players to become accustomed to seeing my

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19 See Appendix B for a description of the tasks involved in defeating Karazhan and Serpentshrine Cavern.
name in guild chat or on the VoIP server. Because players were comfortable with my presence, I was able to gather more natural data. It was not necessary to go on a raid in order to access the VoIP raid channel, so I was able to collect data without being in the “room.” This helped to mitigate the observer’s paradox to some extent. A member of the raiding party who I knew in real life permitted me to observe the raid on his computer screen while it was in progress. This allowed me to later correlate the verbal recordings with in-game events. While my presence may have affected that player’s behavior, the other members of the raid team could not see or hear me and soon forgot that I was there.

After transcribing the recordings, I coded them according to Tannen’s categories of gendered speech. The variables I looked for were:

- Requests for information
- Requests for help or assistance
- Suggestions
- Apologies
- Admissions of weakness or lack of knowledge

In addition to requests for factual information (Who’s tanking? When are we starting?), requests for information also included asking for directions. Closely related to requests for information are requests for help. The difference between the two categories in this study is that a request for assistance requires that the person being asked do something for the person who is asking (the difference between “Where is it?” and “Could you heal me?”). Requests that were made on behalf of others were coded as suggestions. Statements that involved “could,” “would,” or “please” were also coded as suggestions, including statements such as “Could someone heal

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20 “Tank” is a type of character that is designed to distract the monster so that other players can kill it from a distance. Because it will be the focus of much of the monster’s attack, the tank is usually very tough and can take a lot of damage before dying.
Bob?” While this could be seen as giving another player an order, not all players have the ability to heal, so the player who noticed the problem might not have had the means of fixing it. Statements that acknowledged mistakes or faults on the part of the speaker were coded as apologies. These phrases typically included “Sorry” or “My fault.” Admissions of weakness/lack of knowledge meant that the player openly admitted a fault or a failing but did not pair it with a request for help or an apology. Tannen argues that these five categories are not usually found in large numbers in conversation among groups of men. Their presence, or lack of it, will provide clues to how these players are performing their gender in the game.

Although Tannen has done extensive work on the gender dynamics of interruption, I did not focus on interruptions in this study for two reasons. The first is that due to the lack of physical presence, it is sometimes difficult to tell if the interruption was intentional. Two players could have depressed the “Talk” button at the same time, for example. This is further complicated by server lag. The players may not have spoken at the same time at all, but their words were processed by the program simultaneously. It is also harder to tell when someone is done speaking because the VoIP server the guild uses is not sensitive enough to transmit breathing like a phone might. A player may think another player is done when he is simply taking a deep breath. The second reason is that the nature of VoIP means that it is hard for anyone to hear what is said when two people talk simultaneously. Instead of one player seizing control of the conversational floor, he creates verbal chaos which can derail both speakers. These factors made it too difficult to accurately study the players’ use of interruptions.

I followed up my raid recordings with player interviews. Interview candidates were selected from the pool of recording participants and were contacted individually. They were asked to e-mail in a second consent form prior to the interview. Interviews were conducted and
recorded via the guild’s VoIP program and included members of the guild’s leadership team as well as raiders. Interviews took approximately an hour on average and most of the players were playing the game while speaking with me. The goal of the interviews was to determine the players’ motivations for their behavior. This included their reasons for playing *World of Warcraft*, joining Heaven and Earth, going on raids, and their behavior during raids. A secondary goal of the interviews was to determine how closely the players’ description of their behaviors matched their actual behaviors. Butler argues that most people are unaware of how culture shapes conceptions of gender and determines how it will be enacted by individuals. The presence of players who are consciously challenging normative gender roles would mean something far different than players who are performing their gender atypically but are unaware of it.
ANALYSIS

Guild Gender Demographics

![Bar chart showing gender distribution by rank]

Figure 2. Player Gender by Rank

Gender data for all players in the Lord through Initiate ranks is displayed in Figure 2. Due to difficulties in collecting data for Errants, only players whose gender was known (17 players out of a possible 49) are included in the data set for this and later charts. Despite this shortcoming, the rank was included to help illustrate trends.

Like many MMORPGs, *World of Warcraft* has more male than female players. In the case of Heaven and Earth, men outnumber women in every rank by a factor of at least 2 to 1, with Initiate the most closely matched rank (7 males, 3 females). Although men outnumber women by a significant margin in the Errant rank (non-raiding members), the gender gap is smaller in the raiding ranks (Lord, Veteran, Crusader, Knight, and Initiate). Because the pool of female applicants for raiding slots is necessarily smaller due to the overall lack of female players, their increased presence in the raiding ranks may indicate that the guild makes an effort to include women. It is interesting to note, however, that there are no women among the ranks of
the guild leadership (Lord and Veteran). A long-time Council member mentioned female officers during an interview, but statements made by newer members indicate that there have not been any for some time.

![Figure 3. Avatar Gender of Players’ Main Characters by Rank](image)

Although player gender demographics follow expected trends, it is when we examine the gender of the players’ avatars that things get interesting. While there are still more male avatars in most of the ranks, the gender gap is much narrower. Female avatars actually outnumber male avatars by a factor of 2 to 1 in the Knight rank. The increased presence of female avatars in all ranks indicates that many of the male players are playing female characters. It is unclear, however, whether it is only male players who are playing avatars of the opposite gender. The decreased number of male avatars would seem to indicate as such, but how widespread is the phenomenon?
The trend detected in Figure 3 is borne out here. Female players are still outnumbered by males in all ranks; however, this is not always the case when avatar gender is considered. In all ranks (with the possible exception of Errants), females choose female avatars. While men seem to favor male avatars, there is a significant fraction of male players choosing female avatars. In two of the ranks, Knight and Errant, males playing female avatars are greater than the number of female players. It should be stressed that this data is for the players’ main characters—the one that they play most often. The guild only allows each player one main character in order to equalize loot distribution. A player’s main character is more than just the current recipient of loot, however. He or she is making a commitment to play that character night after night for potentially months at a time. This means that other members of the guild will likely refer to the player by his or her avatar name; and, in many players’ minds, the avatar will inform their mental image of a particular player. The number of male players choosing female avatars in all of the ranks indicates that there is little in-game social stigma attached to men playing female avatars. More is at stake here than male players feeling comfortable when others address them by

Figure 4. Player versus Avatar Gender (Main Character) by Rank
what is usually considered a female name, however. Although speaking of MUDs, Turkle’s insight into the relationship between player and avatar applies equally well to MMORPGs. She argues that on-line games give “. . . people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones. MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion” (Turkle 12).

Unlike MUDs, World of Warcraft players are visually represented in the game world through their on-screen avatars which has a subsequent effect on players’ relationships with their avatars. Their alternate selves no longer exist in the imagination but stand before them. This new type of virtual embodiment further challenges how (gendered) identity is constructed.

Significantly, in none of the ranks do female players choose to play male avatars. In the guild as a whole, I was able to find only one female who played a male avatar and that was only as an alternate character, or “Alt.”

![Figure 5. Player Gender versus Avatar Gender (Alternate Character)](image)

Although a player can have only one main character, he or she can have several alternate characters. Alts belong to a separate rank that is classed below Errant. The only exception to this rule is that a few of the officers’ Alts are listed in the officer ranks (Lord and Veteran). This is
done primarily to allow officers to take care of guild business, such as adding new members or having access to the in-game officer chat, without having to log out of the character they are currently playing and log back in as a different character simply to handle routine administrative duties. They are still restricted to one main character, and their Alts are treated the same as other players’ when it comes to raiding and loot distribution. Like main characters, Alts often reflect a substantial investment of time and energy by the players. 41% of the Alts in Heaven and Earth are level seventy. All but one of the players with an Alt had also reached level seventy on his or her main character and many players had more then one level seventy Alt. These characters may be Alts; but, given the amount of time it takes to reach level seventy, these players are still dedicating a substantial amount of time and effort to them.

Although there were significant numbers of men playing female main characters, more opted to play avatars that reflected their own gender. The equal number of male and female avatars played by men indicates that gender switching is even more common on alternate characters. With one exception, female players in all the ranks choose to play female avatars for both their main characters and their Alts. Although the lone female playing a male avatar would seem to indicate that women occasionally choose avatars of the opposite gender, the avatar’s background does not bear this out. In this case, the male avatar was a gift to the female player from a male player who could no longer play the game due to real life circumstances. Rather than delete the account and have the character he had worked hard on go to waste, he offered it to his female friend. Although she frequently plays the male character, she did not choose its gender. Even though this set of data is for only one guild, Nick Yee’s data indicates that in World of Warcraft only 1% of male avatars are played by women while 50% of female avatars are
played by men (Yee, “WoW Gender Bending”).21 Slippage between the avatar’s identity and the player’s is fairly common in World of Warcraft. Players frequently switch from referring to the avatar as a separate entity, to referring to the avatar as a representative of themselves in the game world, and to referring to their characters as themselves—sometimes within the same sentence. Multiple avatars thus enable players to inhabit multiple (gendered) selves. Butler argues that “multiple identifications can constitute a nonhierarchical configuration of shifting and overlapping identifications that call into question the primacy of any univocal gender attribution” (66). This avatar-gender flexibility among the male players may indicate a less restrictive approach to gender in the larger World of Warcraft culture.

Raid Data

The focus of this study is on how players perform their gender through language. Raids were chosen because they are high stress situations where players must keep track of numerous variables simultaneously. This means that they are less likely to closely monitor their speech and should produce more natural data. The guild’s VoIP program enables players to talk to each other even when they are performing individual tasks with avatars that may be scattered throughout the game world. In raids, however, the players’ avatars are actually interacting and they are attempting to complete cooperative tasks. In order for any group to function successfully, its members must follow unspoken rules that dictate acceptable and unacceptable behavior. A study of raiding behavior should be able to detect those rules via their effects on players’ language use.

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21 This phenomenon is not confined to World of Warcraft. Yee’s work on EverQuest indicates a similar gender switching trend. See The Norrathian Scrolls: A Study of EverQuest by Nick Yee.
The first set of linguistic data comes from a ten-person raid dungeon called Karazhan.\textsuperscript{22} The raid took four hours to complete and the players included eleven males and one female.\textsuperscript{23} Utterances made by the female player were excluded from the above data set. Smaller dungeons (less than twenty-five players) tend to be informally scheduled affairs and often include players from outside the guild. Although this was a raid set up and run by Heaven and Earth members, two of the players were from another end-game raiding guild. There is a friendly competition between the two guilds over who can defeat a new boss or dungeon first, but the pool of players at this level is small enough that their members know each other and often play together.

\textsuperscript{22} See Appendix B for a description of the tasks involved in defeating this dungeon.
\textsuperscript{23} One player was brought into to replace another part way through the raid, and one player was in the VoIP channel listening but not part of the raid itself.
Figure 7. Ten-Person Karazhan Raid

The second set of linguistic data comes from another ten-person Karazhan raid.\textsuperscript{24} The raid took two hours to complete and the players included thirteen males and two females.\textsuperscript{25} Statements made by the female players were excluded from the above data set. Although this was a raid set up and run by Heaven and Earth players, one player who was a member of Heaven and Earth used a character that was part of another guild for this raid. He was joined by a friend from the same guild. Because raiding slots are so scarce in Heaven and Earth, raiders may have characters in other non-end game guilds so that they can participate in raids in lower-level dungeons. This raid is especially interesting because it was significantly shorter than the other Karazhan raid (Figure 6). While this difference could lead to a corresponding decrease in the number of requests for information, suggestions, apologies, etc., if only the first two hours of the

\textsuperscript{24} See Appendix B for a description of the tasks involved in defeating this dungeon.

\textsuperscript{25} One player was brought into to replace another part way through the raid, and four players were in the VoIP channel listening but not part of the raid itself.
longer Karazhan (Figure 6) raid are considered the differences persist. There were 48% more requests for help, 41% more suggestions, and 50% more admissions of weakness/lack of knowledge in the longer Karazhan raid than in the shorter one. In fact, every category of the longer raid either closely matched or exceeded the totals of the one in Figure 7 after only one hour of play time. Players in the second raid also spoke 46% less frequently than those in the first, and the raid was far less successful overall. The players only progressed as far as the Maiden of Virtue before calling it a night. Reaching this same point only took members of the first raid an hour, and they then went on to fight several more bosses in the same dungeon. The most notable difference between the two groups was that the second raid contained a player whose speaking style was very similar to Tannen’s definition of “typical” male speech. He tended to phrase statements as orders rather than requests, for example; and this seemed to have a chilling effect on the other players. Further differences and their effects are discussed in more detail below.
Figure 8. Twenty-five-Person Serpentshrine Cavern

This final set of data comes from a twenty-five-person raid dungeon called Serpentshrine Cavern. The raid took an hour and thirteen minutes to complete and the players included twenty-one males and five females. Statements made by the female players were excluded from the above data set. Because this was a formally scheduled raid, all of the players were members of Heaven and Earth. This raid is also notable because the players were unaware that I was recording. I had announced my project prior to earlier raids in order to encourage more participation but it was no longer necessary to do so at this point in the study. Although players could still see that I was logged into the game and the VoIP server, my silence meant that many may not have noticed my presence. Although the amount of data from this raid may seem similar to the shorter Karazhan raid (Figure 7), the attitude among the players in this raid was quite

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26 See Appendix B for a description of the tasks involved in defeating this dungeon.

27 One player was initially only listening to the raid but was brought into to replace another player part way through the raid.
different. Heaven and Earth had been farming Serpentshrine Cavern for quite some time already and all of the players were familiar with how to defeat it. This decreased the both the time it took to complete the task and the number of questions players needed to ask about their role in the group. Conversations frequently took the form of a series of one or two word phrases.

PLAYER F. It’s on free-for-all, right?
PLAYER A. I see free-for-all.
PLAYER B. I don’t know. Is it, [Player N]?
PLAYER C. Yup.
PLAYER N. Yup.

PLAYER A. Alright, in fifteen. (Serpentshrine Cavern)²⁸

Although this raid is shorter than the other two, the number of utterances in all of the categories is greater in this raid than in the second Karazhan raid (Figure 7). Despite only having half the time, this group requested help and admitted weakness/lack of knowledge 59% more often and they were able to quickly defeat the boss. This indicates that these players not only prefer a certain communication style during raids, they are more successful when they use it.

Requests for Information

Requests for information fall into four broad categories—requests for a player to repeat something, requests for directions, clarification of instructions, and requests for information the player did not have access to. Figure 9 displays data from the longer Karazhan raid discussed in Figure 6.

²⁸“Free-for-all” is a type of loot distribution system which allows any player to pick up any time without taking turns.
Not all microphones or Internet connections are created equal, which makes some players more difficult to understand than others. Ventrilo, the VoIP program the guild uses, also announces whenever a player logs into the server or joins the channel, so a player’s words may get lost in the announcement. Additionally, if two people try to talk at once, it can be difficult to understand either one. This leads to a lot of requests for a player to repeat something. For example:

PLAYER A. He got a jack-o’-lantern.

PLAYER C. He got what?” (Karazhan, 23 Feb, 2008).

While these are requests for information, they are due to the problems inherent in this form of communication and are less illustrative of changes in gendered language patterns.

The other three categories, which make up 86% of the requests for information, are more indicative of this shift. As Tannen notes in You Just Don’t Understand, men are notorious for refusing to ask for directions. These players, however, asked for directions eleven times. Although this set only makes up 5% of the requests for information (less than requests for a player to repeat something), this is still a significant number given the length of the recording. Tannen argues that “finding one’s own way is an essential part of the independence that men
perceive to be a prerequisite for self-respect” (62). Admitting lack of knowledge puts men “one down” in the conversational hierarchy. This means that they will be unlikely to ask for directions at all, much less as frequently as eleven times in a four hour period. It is important to note that this data does not include requests made by the female player and that it was not just one male player asking for directions. Although not displayed here, players asked for directions in all of the raids. This was especially true in Serpentshrine cavern where players had to set up a complex relay system in order to pass items between them. They began the raid with statements such as “So what position was [Player A]?” (Serpentshrine Cavern) and used similar statements throughout the fight. Given that the success of the group in any of the raids may very well depend on everyone being in position and knowing where everyone else is, getting this information seems to have taken priority over “saving face” by finding one’s own way.

Requests for clarification of instructions made up 25% of the requests for information and included such things as “So we takin’ out Dorothee first?” (Karazhan, 23 Feb. 2008). While this could be considered a suggestion, for the purposes of this study utterances coded as suggestions typically contained words like “let’s” or “should.” In this case, the player could have said “Let’s take out Dorothee first.” Although this version would have been phrased as a suggestion rather than an assertion, it would still have give the player more agency in the decision making process. Nevertheless this player (and others) frequently used the suggestion technique, as the data demonstrates they also had little problem asking for instructions. The raid teams are structured so that the tank is the raid leader and the one who gives orders. Although tanks are designed to take a lot of damage before expiring, they are putting their avatar’s life on the line. If the other players fail to kill the monster quickly, the tank will be the first to die. This relationship is reciprocal (without the tank distracting it, the monster would attack more
defenseless players), so it is critically important that everyone be on the same page. Clarifying instructions now will save everyone a huge repair bill later. 29

The final category (requests for information the player did not have access to), is especially interesting given that it makes up just over half (55%) of the requests for information. In order to make such a request, the player not only had to admit to not knowing something, he also had to admit to not having access to the data. Phrases such as “Do you have to come out of shadow mode for it?” (Karazhan, 23 Feb 2008), depart significantly from Tannen’s findings on how men use language.

Requests for Help

In all three raids, requests for help were the second smallest group of statements. This may be due, in part, to the fast-paced nature of raiding. “Heal me!” takes far less time to say than “Heal me, please!” or “Could someone heal me?” Despite this, players did ask each other for help, although such requests tended to take the form of “Can I get a bubble?” (Karazhan, 23 Feb, 2008). 30 Players also seemed to make an effort to phrases things as a requests rather than orders. During the Serpentshrine Cavern raid, one player stated “[Player B], get it off me when you can” (Serpentshrine Cavern). While this could be seen as an order, the player notably did not say “[Player B], get it off me.” Instead, he acknowledged that the other player may not be able to help him immediately. Rather than phrase his statement as an order, he choose to make it a request. As Tannen notes in You Just Don’t Understand, tone plays a large role in how messages are framed. “Heal [Player B]” (Serpentshrine Cavern) could easily be interrupted as an order unless one could hear the note of desperation in Player B’s voice as his avatar slowly succumbed

29 A character’s gear is damaged when it is attacked and/or killed. Gear can be repaired by in-game vendors for a fee. The more a character dies, the more expensive it will be to repair his or her gear.
30 “Bubble” can refer to a variety of things. Here, it means a protective spell that absorbs some of the monsters’ attacks.
to the monster’s attacks. As the main tank, Player B was too busy frantically mashing buttons to phrase his request more nicely, but his tone makes it clear that he is asking for assistance from his companions rather than ordering them to comply. Tannen’s argument that men are concerned with relative status means that they are reluctant to ask for help. “If relations are inherently hierarchical, then the one who has more information is framed as higher up on the ladder, by virtue of being more knowledgeable and competent” (Tannen 62). From this perspective, asking for help entails an acknowledgement that one does not possess the skills to solve a problem and that someone else is better equipped (read: higher status) to handle the situation. A successful raid, however, requires that players continually advise each other of their avatars’ health, mana, etc. If the other players do not realize that the tank is in trouble, for example, they may focus their attention elsewhere until it is too late. Furthermore, because characters are specialized creatures, no matter how competent a particular player is at World of Warcraft, he may not have (nor could he obtain) the skills he needs. A Healer can not tank a monster no matter how much he may want to. Because this is a fact of the game, it may explain why the number of requests for help held constant across all three raids. With its smaller number or requests for help, the Serpentshrine Cavern raid might indicate otherwise. Because the players were so familiar with the dungeon and with each other, however, they were less likely to need help as frequently as they would in a less familiar scenario with a group of people they may have only met a few hours ago.

31 “Mana” is a way of quantifying magical ability. A player who is low on mana will be unable to cast as many spells as a player who has more mana.
Suggestions

Drawing on Sach’s research with children, Tannen argues that women tend to phrase things as suggestions through the use of “let’s.” In this predominantly male group, however, “let’s” was used quite frequently, especially during the two successful raids.

- “Ok, let’s go outside and, ah, go pick up Curator from the outside” (Karazhan, 23 Feb. 2008).
- “Let’s see how fast we can push our DPS [damage per second] and keep everybody up” (Karazhan, 23 Feb. 2008).
- “Alright, let’s focus” (Serpent’shrine Cavern).

Although those in the Serpent’shrine Cavern raid used “let’s” less frequently than the first Karazhan run (Figure 6), players still tended to phrase things as suggestions. During the pre-raid set up, one player told another “… if you want to mix it up in the middle and see yourself which one it’s easier to heal me on since you’re the one healing me. I’ll let you make that call, okay?” (Serpent’shrine Cavern). As this was one of the raid leaders, he could easily have told the other player what to do but he chose not to. This type of communication strategy was utilized by the rank and file members as well, including one who said “Like, why don’t the four outside-ring Healers go to where our positions would be but along the inner ring? You know what I mean?” (Serpent’shrine Cavern). This suggestion was taken up by the raid leaders who agreed that it had merit. This pattern persisted in the more informal Karazhan raids as well. During a discussion of what type of attack had the best change of success, one player stated “I think Icepoint works, too.” (Karazhan, 23 Feb. 2008). Instead of simply stating his position, this player framed his opinion with “I think.” These strategies foster a collective decision making process that strengthens group connections by making everyone feel involved and important.
One of the most notable differences between the two Karazhan raids is the use, or lack thereof, of suggestions. Overall, players in the first group (Figure 6) were far more likely to utilize suggestions. A member of the first group might say “You know what would really help this is if one of the rogues could try and keep a five stack or a five combo point expose armor up. It would really help my threat” (Karazhan, 23 Feb. 2008). However, a player in the second group (Figure 6), stated “Dude, just leave him alone. Let the off tank use him to build up rage; just use that rage on Moroes. ‘Cause he doesn’t hit hard enough to do shit” (Karazhan, 12 March 2008). In the first statement, the player is asking another to do something for him, but he is careful to hedge so as not to impose. He does not tell the rogues to “keep a five stack” he suggests that they “could try and keep a five stack.” The player behind the second statement does not follow this pattern. His statement seems much closer to an order, than a suggestion. This player was not the raid leader, so he would not normally be expected to give orders, making his phrasing more of a personal choice. Although these young men may be utilizing atypical communication strategies, they are not completely unmindful of status. Once one player began phrasing things as statements, other players began to follow suit and players who had consistently used suggestions in the first raid switched to statements in the second.

Of all of the raids I studied, the second Karazhan raid was the least successful. Tannen may offer a clue as to why. She argues that “… in a community that is threatened by conflict … [members] formulate requests as proposals rather than orders to make it easy for others to express other preferences without provoking a confrontation” (Tannen 154). While they are engaged in fictional combat, these players must still function as a group in order to survive.

32 “Threat” is a way to measure how dangerous something is and is usually used to describe a tanking ability. The monster will attack whatever target is the most threatening, so players will use a variety of items and spells to increase or decrease their threat as needed.

33 Raids will sometimes have two tanks: a “main tank” and an “off tank.”
Internal conflict would jeopardize group dynamics and is an even greater threat than the monsters to the success of the raid.

**Apologies**

Despite their differences, approximately the same number of apologies was found in all of the raid recordings. Because an apology frequently involves acknowledging a personal error or fault, Tannen argues that men will try to avoid apologizing in order to maintain their group status. In-game circumstances may make it more likely for a player to apologize than he might in real life. If a player makes a mistake during combat, it can quickly snowball into a catastrophe that affects everyone. A player’s “Uh-oh, I pulled a . . . mob. Just one. Sorry”34 (Karazhan, 23 Feb. 2008) immediately preceded the unprepared party being attacked by a group of monsters. In this case, and others, the player is usually aware of what his mistake has cost his friends and may see acknowledging his fault as taking responsibility for his actions. Although game conditions may make men more likely to use communication strategies that focus on maintaining relationships, their behavior, at least when it comes to apologies, is not completely atypical. Tannen also notes that “[f]rom the point of view of connection, an apology should be matched. And from the perspective of status, an apology should be deflected” (234). Apologies were rarely commented on by the other players who usually shifted the blame to something in game. Although the players did not use the “connection strategy” of matching the apology, by not openly acknowledging the other player’s statement, the group negated possible status loss on the part of the offending player. If no one notices it, then it does not count. This behavior demonstrates an interesting hybrid between the two communication styles. These players are still affected by real world social norms, but they are shifting how and when these norms are applied.

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34 Monsters are frequently grouped together in “mobs” in dungeons. Once one monster is attacked (“pulled”), all of the monsters in the mob join the fight.
Admissions of Weakness

Although not originally an intended category for study, admissions of weakness/lack of knowledge were included when it became clear that players frequently admitted fault but did not apologize for that fault. Players in all of the raids stated that they had forgotten to do something or that they did not know something. Unlike requests for information, in which the player wanted the information provided, admitting lack of knowledge usually took the form of a general advisory such as “You got healing ones? I think my refresh was off, so I’m not sure if I was healing people . . .” (Karazhan, 23 Feb 2008). The existence of such patterns in both of the successful raids (first Karazhan and Serpentshrine) indicates that they have a functional purpose. Due to the complexity of raiding, it is important that everyone is aware of potential problems. Pretending to know something when one does not may jeopardize the entire raid. It appears that these players have decided that group success is more important than temporary individual success in the form of group standing.

Not surprisingly, there were far fewer admissions of weakness in the second Karazhan raid (Figure 7). Although some players did seem to be aware of the source of the tension, none seemed to be aware of the linguistic differences that might have been at the root of the problem. The high tension environment in this raid made people less likely to admit fault so as to avoid causing further problems or having the blame shifted on to them. Even if they were unaware of exactly what was happening, the presence of a player who was more focused on being right (and thus establishing his status in the group) may have made other players more aware of group dynamics and their standing within it than might have otherwise been the case. This would have made them even more reluctant to engage in behavior, such as admitting weakness, which might put them “one-down” in the group. These men are not completely unaware of hierarchy or the
importance of establishing one’s place in the group; however, they seem to have decided that their energy is better spent elsewhere. Data from the other raids indicate that players are usually more focused on defeating the monster than on maintaining status, so they disregard many hierarchy-focused communication strategies.

Considered as a whole, these results indicate that these players are consistently using atypical communication patterns. The fact that these patterns persist even when members of other guilds are present indicates that this is not an isolated phenomenon. This is further supported by players’ reactions to the more “typical” speaker in the second Karazhan raid (Figure 7). Not only were the players uncomfortable, the raid was unsuccessful. Because these are some of the best players on the server, they would not be utilizing these communication strategies if they were unsuccessful. Men in Western civilization have had success while phrasing statements as orders and avoiding apologizing for centuries, however. Both Butler and Tannen argue that gender norms are cultural products and Tannen states that “the styles more typical of men are generally evaluated more positively and are taken as the norm” (235). The question then becomes: why does the game culture of World of Warcraft favor a style of communication that is so different from real world styles? And further, how is the definition of “masculine” shifting in this virtual environment? Given the link between language and gender identified by both Butler and Tannen, do these atypical communication patterns indicate that these players are performing their gender differently than their real world counterparts?
CONCLUSION

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues “[i]f the Inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (136). This is especially true in the virtual environment of *World of Warcraft*. Unlike real life, the game provides individuals the opportunity to choose the (gendered) body they will present to the (virtual) world. This conscious choice by the player highlights the constructed nature of gender both in the virtual world and in the real world. The “naturalness” of gender is further complicated by the realization that a player’s virtual gender does not necessarily correspond to his “real” gender and by the fact that many players are not playing human characters. Many gendered characteristics (height, mass, tone of voice) vary widely between the different races, which upsets the normative equation of certain characteristics with a specific gender.

In some cases, others may be able to hear a player’s voice and thus assign him a gender, but the vast majority of players only interact with each other through their avatars. If two players do not have access to the same VoIP server, they have no way of verifying each other’s gender independently of their avatars’ gender and behavior. Gender thus becomes a conscious performance on the part of the player. Given the number of men playing female avatars, external (virtual) gender can not be relied upon as an indication of the gender of the player inside the avatar. This is not to say that gender no longer matters in the game, but that it is no longer possible for players to assume that the external signifier of gender (the gender of the avatar) is a reliable indication of interior gender (the gender of the player), thus further undermining the “inner truth” of gender. Although not speaking of gamers and their avatars, Butler’s argument
that “[i]f the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performed, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance” (137) seems tailor-made for this situation. *World of Warcraft* separates players from their gender and makes the performance of that gender a conscious act. Because of how *World of Warcraft* is designed, what is usually taken as the primary signifier of gender—the penis or lack of it—is missing entirely from both genders. The lack of a virtual phallus means that players are able to bypass it as the ultimate signifier of identity and power. While a player may have a penis in real life, he does not have one in the game, thus calling into question the construction of gender around the presence/lack binary.

As Butler argues, gender is constituted and enforced by culture. The use of VoIP means that players can hear their companions’ gender in their voices and thus know their “true” gender. This use of language reinscribes the player’s gender on to his virtual body. Butler, however, is aware of the impossibility of fully subverting the discursive production of gender because that subversion must come through language which reinforces its power to describe and limit gender. Instead, Butler suggests that “[t]he more insidious and effective strategy it seems is a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest ‘sex,’ but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of ‘identity’ in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic” (128). It is through the virtual environment’s challenges to identity as a unified concept that gender binaries can begin to be unraveled. By their very natures, on-line games force players to inhabit a postmodern self and perhaps offer a way out of a system of gender which depends on unified
subjects in order to function. This increased identity flexibility challenges how gendered behavior is categorized and reveals the artificial nature of “masculine” and “feminine.”

Because these games allow players to consciously create their (gendered) identities, they “[give] us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently” (Butler 110). A male can be a female. An accountant can be a Warrior. A suburban housewife can be a Troll. One player can be multiple Selves simultaneously. “‘RL [real life] is just one more window . . . and it’s not usually [the] best one’” (Turkle 13). Gamers are aware of how much of identity is constructed and how much of that construction can be changed. This approach to reality means that gamers intuitively grasp “the very notion that our world is open source, and that reality itself is up for grabs. For, more than anyone else, a real gamer knows that we are the ones creating the rules” (Rushkoff 421). A key component of open source programming is that it is infinitely malleable and there are no inherently right or wrong permutations. One reality/position does not necessarily dominate another. The multiple, fractured, postmodern self created by the game can not be easily confined by normative definitions of gendered identity.

Most players are aware that others will conflate their gender and their avatar’s. Just as a man who displays effeminate behaviors in the real world will be accused of homosexuality, men who play female characters can find their sexual orientation called into question. A poster on Nick Yee’s site stated that “I think that in order to play a female in a role playing game, particularly a multiplayer one where you interact with others, you are playing out some kind of unconscious homosexual fantasy” (chris). Several other posters were quick to point out the flaws in this logic (immaturity and not knowing the difference between the game and real life were major themes). Despite those who think similarly to this poster, a significant fraction of men still
choose to play a female avatar. While not all players choose avatars of the opposite gender, the players’ reactions to the post as well as their continued gender-switching indicates that many no longer simply equate “male” and “masculine” or always see male/female and masculine/feminine as representing oppositional terms.

In her discussion of the body as surface which gender is inscribed upon through culturally regulated performances, Butler argues that gender should be considered “... a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (139). In World of Warcraft, the body as a bearer of gendered meaning has been taken out of the equation. The player’s physical body is not present and the virtual body is an unreliable signifier. All that is left is language. The reliance on questioning a player about his gender and hearing his voice reveals that a significant fraction of gendered behavior relies on language use as the ultimate signifier of difference. As we can see above, there are problems with relying on language to determine gender. The virtual world’s challenges to a unified concept of identity and the gendered body affect the players’ language use. Even when players can hear each other, and thus ascribe gender to their companions, there is slippage in how gender is performed. The linguistic data discussed above indicate that not only do male World of Warcraft players utilize atypical communication styles, they prefer it. Tannen notes that the differences between how women and men use language derive not from biology, but from socialization. Women are taught to focus on maintaining relationships while men are taught to focus on establishing dominance over others. Their respective communication styles have had gender categories imposed upon them but are not inherently gendered in and of themselves. These players’ departures from strict definitions of gendered behavior problematize definitions of “feminine” and “masculine” behaviors for the gamers themselves. Without a stable
(gendered) identity to restrict them, these players are able to reformulate cultural conceptions of
gendered behavior to suit this new environment. The flexibility of the virtual self means that they
are able to use aspects of both genders to assemble a new type of self. While these virtual selves
are not without gender, they are not unified monolithic wholes. Their lack of cohesion and
bricolage nature challenges notions of how the gendered self is constructed.

There has been much talk in recent years about a “crisis in masculinity” which many lay
at the feet of feminists. In Kimmel’s paraphrase of this position, traditionalists often argue that
“[i]f only women would get out of the public sphere and go back into the private sphere where
they belong, . . . masculinity would be saved” (198). These arguments tend to be based on ideas
that opportunity is a zero-sum game and, as women’s opportunities increase, men’s must
necessarily decrease. Those opportunities, the argument goes, belong to men and women should
give them back. Without them, a man can not be a “real” man and thus his world (and by
extension society’s) will fall apart. Michael Kimmel argues against this idea in Manhood in
America and instead locates the problem in cultural conceptions of masculinity. “As a collection
of dos and don’ts, the male sex role was a recipe for despair; given what it took to be a real man,
few, if any, men could live up to the image, and hence all men would feel like failures as men”
(Kimmel 185). The problem is not that women have taken opportunities that belong to men but
that our society has constructed an impossible definition of manhood. A “real man,” for example,
must be the sole breadwinner in the household. He is also supposed to provide his family with a
house in the suburbs, yearly vacations, and pay his children’s college tuitions out of his salary.
While there may be men who can do this, most men are doomed to failure. Kimmel argues that it
is time for a new definition of masculinity—one that does not rely on excluding others and that
allows men to decide what is best for them and their families rather than worrying about fulfilling society’s impossible gendered expectations.

As Butler is well aware, subverting gender norms is not something that can be done by simply rewriting the definitions of masculine and feminine. She argues that challenges to a unified self built on oppositional binaries offer a chance to “. . . invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality” (Butler 139). Feminism has challenged many traditional gender roles as they pertain to women. While there have been critiques of masculine gender roles as well, the feminists’ own example proves that normative gender categories are best broken down from the inside. Women can wear pants and choose a career over a family. Men who wear skirts or choose to stay home with their children are looked at askance. Butler’s work challenges not only the social construction of “woman” but the construction of “gender” as a category. This means that the cultural systems behind female and male must be dismantled. For men, this entails, at least in part, contesting how masculine gender roles affect the way they form relationships with others. Because hierarchies involve an imbalance of power, they make it harder for close relationships to form between men. Kimmel argues that “it’s other men who are important to American men; American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other” (5). Traditionally these masculine identities must be defined oppositionaly—against rather than with others. The members of Heaven and Earth, however, seem to have found a way to define manhood that involves working together rather than working against each other.

In high stress raiding situations, the most important things is not killing more of the enemy, but doing what is necessary for everyone to survive. Each member of the group must be trusted to do his job regardless of how much glory is or is not involved. Real glory is won by
helping others and success is a group rather than an individual achievement. In order to be successful, each of the players in the raiding party need to be able to trust one another. This means that their relationships must focus on maintaining connections with others rather than asserting dominance over others. All of the players I interviewed spoke about their attraction to World of Warcraft stemming from its emphasis on community and working with others. One player stated, “I like people who get a long and want to help each other out” (Player M). Their emphasis on connections, as exemplified by language use, gives them access to a more fulfilling gaming experience and more fulfilling relationships than they would have had if they only focused on being better than the other guy. Academics have challenged traditional gender roles and noted their shortcomings for years. These gamers have moved these discussions out of academia and into daily life. By performing their gender differently, they have challenged ideas about what it means to “be a man,” perhaps for the better.
FUTURE RESEARCH

These players’ use of atypical gendered communication styles—such as the use of suggestions in lieu of apologies, asking for directions, etc.—opens up several avenues for further work. Although intriguing in their own right, it is unclear if these trends hold true in other gaming situations. Many of the players did not know each other prior to joining Heaven and Earth so their use of similar communication patterns indicates that these behaviors are relatively widespread. That a player from another guild could be integrated successfully into the first Karazhan raid (Figure 6) supports this conclusion as well. It is possible, however, that the members of Heaven and Earth represent the exception rather than the rule. Heaven and Earth has an application process specifically designed to weed out potential raiders that do not mesh with established group dynamics. Although a player from another guild was included in a raid, he may have been chosen over his guildmates because he used the same communication strategies as Heaven and Earth’s members. The guild’s leadership also strongly emphasizes cooperation and team spirit. Although these elements have brought the guild much success, other guilds may use different strategies to create effective raiding groups. Furthermore, at least one of the Council members has training in how to lead small groups in combat. Guilds without such resources may have developed different leadership and playing styles which could have an effect on the communication strategies of their members. Similar studies of other raiding guilds are needed to determine how common these behavior patterns are.

An analysis of some of the best guilds in the world, as opposed to the best on one server, as well as guilds from different types of servers would be especially useful. Farstriders is a relatively young, low-population server which Heaven and Earth transferred to en masse when it first went on-line. This means that the guild may have been able to shape server culture more
than it might have on a server with a more established population, possibly fostering a communication style unique to Farstriders. Although many of the current guild members either transferred to the server independently or began playing World of Warcraft after Farstriders came on line, without comparisons to other servers it is difficult to determine how far these findings can be generalized. Other factors may be in play on other servers as well. While competition for Heaven and Earth’s raiding slots is keen, it would be much fiercer on a higher population server due to a larger pool of applicants. Players on more advanced servers would also be more likely to have better gear, thus increasing the competition even further. Since this is less of an issue for Heaven and Earth’s players, they may be less concerned with status overall. Data from guilds in different environments would help determine how widespread the behaviors and attitudes detected in this study are.

Ducheneaut et al. argue in “Building an MMO with Mass Appeal,” that PvP servers are generally considered more challenging by players. Quests are more difficult to complete when a player can be attacked at any time, so success on a PvP server requires more gaming skill. In these situations, strong guild relationships might be more a necessity (for mutual protection) than an option. This could, in turn, affect guild dynamics. Ducheneaut et al. also argue that experienced players tend to favor Horde characters (Heaven and Earth is an Alliance guild) in order to avoid new players who would be more inclined to play an attractive Alliance character. While the members of Heaven and Earth are all experienced World of Warcraft players and many have been playing MMORPGs for years, it is possible that Horde guilds could utilize different communication strategies.

Much of Blizzard’s popularity comes from its ability to attract people typically outside the gaming market. Since many MMORPGs can be difficult to learn and even more difficult to
master, Blizzard made an effort to create an intuitive interface and include in-game information about various game functions. Players are given clear goals and improving one’s character (especially in the early levels) is quite easy. Even as a relatively inexperienced player, I was able to quickly grasp the basics. The game designers also incorporated elements of humor into the game play (at one point, the player can fight “Romulo” and “Julianne” across an opera stage), which makes it less intimidating for new players. While these traits may simply be markers of a good game, they also make World of Warcraft novice friendly. Although the game provides plenty of challenges for advanced gamers, its approachability and ease of play may help level hierarchies based on gaming experience. More difficult to learn, less beginner friendly games should be studied as well. Do players of other MMORPGs such as EverQuest or Asheron’s Call display the same types of communication behaviors? Are the trends noted above a result of particular situations unique to World of Warcraft, or are they indicative of the ways in which MMORPGs as a whole challenge notions of a unified identity?

This study focused on spoken communication, but that is not the only area affected by gender in on-line games. In addition to VoIP, players frequently utilize the in-game text channels to communicate with each other. A study of the use of gendered speech patterns in this medium, especially as compared to existing CMC research on text-based Internet communication, could be a fruitful avenue of approach. Further study of the relationship between players and their avatars, especially in regards to gender-switching, would also reveal more about how gender is constructed in virtual spaces. Turkle’s research in Life on the Screen indicated that women frequently played avatars of the opposite gender in MUDs, yet this is rarely the case in World of Warcraft. What is behind this phenomenon and what are the gender implications of this behavior?
To date, much of the work on MMORPGs comes from science and social-science related disciplines such as communication, computer science, and psychology. More work that considers cultural and literary theory is needed, and gender theory is not the only avenue of approach. For example, many of the avatars in *World of Warcraft* are light-skinned despite the fact that players are free to create dark-skinned ones. How might this behavior be interpreted through the lens of race and/or post-colonial theory? A more in depth postmodern analysis of identity in MMORPGs is needed as well. Also, given the visual nature of the game, what is the role of the gaze in this virtual environment? These three approaches are only brief sketches of possible areas of future study and, much like books and films, literary and cultural theory can be applied to the study of MMORPGs in a variety of ways.

**A Final Note**

While it is unlikely that the members of Heaven and Earth made a conscious decision to subvert normative gender roles, they were faced with the task of creating a community in a radically new environment where many of the rules from real life simply no longer applied. They were more concerned with designing a workable system than maintaining gendered behavior patterns. Their willingness to “go with what worked” allowed them to build new rules out of the bones of the old. The virtual environment of *World of Warcraft* has weakened how the game culture constructs the masculine/feminine binary at the heart of the gendered structure of power and perhaps offers an alternative to these rigid definitions in the wider arena of the real world.
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Serpentshrine Cavern. VoIP Recording. 02 March 2008.


APPENDIX A. AVATAR IMAGES

Alliance Avatars

Each avatar pair is as alike as possible for ease of comparison. All are wearing only their game-imposed underwear and have been arranged in order from the largest to the smallest race.

Figure 10. Draenei Male and Female.

Figure 11. Night Elf Male and Female.

Figure 12. Human Male and Female.

Figure 13. Dwarf Male and Female.

Figure 14. Gnome Male and Female.
Horde Avatars

Each avatar pair is as alike as possible for ease of comparison. All are wearing only their game-imposed underwear and have been arranged in order from the largest to the smallest race.

Figure 15. Troll Male and Female.

Figure 16. Tauren Male and Female.

Figure 17. Orc Male and Female.

Figure 18. Blood Elf Male and Female.

Figure 19. Undead Male and Female
APPENDIX B. RAID DESCRIPTIONS

Karazhan

Karazhan is a ten-person raid dungeon located in the Deadwind Pass in the southern section of the Eastern Kingdoms. It first became available after the release of *World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade* and is accessible only by level seventy players. It is a huge, sprawling dungeon with numerous bosses for players to fight.

The first boss players encounter is Attumen the Huntsman and his horse Midnight. Located in the Stables near Karazhan’s entrance, Attumen and Midnight are optional bosses. If players decide to fight them, they must first engage Midnight. When her health decreases to 95%, Attumen appears and fights besides her. When either one reaches 25% health, Attumen mounts Midnight and they gain the Berserker Charge ability (Attumen chooses a random target, attacks and knocks down his victim, and then returns to fighting the tank). This phase continues until both Attumen and Midnight are defeated.

Players then enter the Grand Ballroom where they find a ghostly banquet in progress. After killing the guests, the players engage Moroes and four guests of honor. These four guests are randomly selected from a list of six: Baroness Dorothea Millstipe, Lady Catriona Von'Indi, Lady Keira Berrybuck, Baron Rafe Dreuger, Lord Robin Daris, and Lord Crispin Ference. Since each one has different abilities, there are a variety of ways to defeat them. Moroes is followed by the optional boss the Maiden of Virtue. Unlike many of the other bosses in Karazhan, the Maiden of Virtue is a straightforward fight without phases.

Following the Maiden of Virtue, the players progress to the Opera Event where they must fight one of three randomly selected groups of bosses loosely based on popular plays: Wizard of Oz, Big Bad Wolf, or Romulo and Julianne. The players studied in this thesis encountered the

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35 *The Burning Crusade*, the first expansion of *World of Warcraft*, was released in January 2007.
Wizard of Oz event which involves defeating Dorothee, Roar, Strawman, Tinhead (who slows down due to rust as the fight progresses), and Dorothee's summoned dog Tito. After all of these bosses have been killed, the Crone appears. She creates tornadoes that pick up players and throw them into the air. After the Opera Event, the players are able to progress deeper into the dungeon where they encounter the next boss—the Curator.

The Curator goes through alternating phases: Flare and Evocation. During the Flare Phase, he summons Astral Flares that randomly attack a non-tank player. After the Curator has summoned ten Flares, he enters the Evocation Phase. During this phase, he regenerates his mana but takes triple damage from attacks without fighting back until he re-enters the Flare Phase. He continues cycling through these two phases until he is defeated. Once the Curator is defeated, the next bosses—Terestian Illhoof, the Shade of Aran, and Nightbane—do not have to be defeated in a specific order.

Terestian Illhoof is an optional boss located in Karazhan’s library. He begins the fight with only his minion Kil'rek but is quickly joined by imps who enter through portals on either side of him. Periodically, Terestian summons a randomly selected member of the raid to the middle of the room to be Sacrificed. The player is bound with Demon Chains which cause significant damage. The other raiders must switch from fighting Terestian and Kil’rek to destroying the Demon Chains before their companion is killed. If Terestian is not defeated within ten minutes, he enters the Enraged Phase and quickly dispatches the group.

The Shade of Aran is another optional boss in Karazhan’s library. A magic user, he attacks players using a variety of spells. Approximately every thirty seconds Aran uses one of three special spells: Flame Wreath, Circular Blizzard, and Magnetic Pull/Slow/Super Arcane Explosion. Flame Wreath creates a fiery circle around three random characters for 20 seconds. If
another player touches the circle, every one in the raid is damaged by a blast of fire. Circular Blizzard creates a moving blizzard that both damages and slows players caught in its path. The final ability is a three spell combination (Magnetic Pull/Slow/Super Arcane Explosion) which pulls everyone to the center of the room and then slows them down so that it is difficult to escape the ensuing Arcane Explosion. When Aran reaches 40% health, he summons four Conjured Water Elementals to join the fight. The first time his mana (spell-casting ability) reaches 20%, Aran turns everyone in the raid into sheep which prevents them from attacking while he drinks water to restore his mana. He does not repeat this spell the next time his mana reaches 20%, and from here it is a straightforward fight.

In the Chess Event, players take control of chess pieces on a giant board. In order to win, players must defeat the evil Medivh in a game of chess by killing his king before he kills theirs. Players can also choose to fight the dragon Nightbane who alternates between two phases. During his Ground Phase he attacks players with a variety of spells and physical assaults. When his health reaches 75%, he enters the Flight Phase and rains attacks down on the party. He then returns to Ground Phase but takes flight again when his health reaches 50% and 25%.

The final Karazhan boss the players in this study encountered was Prince Malchezaar, who goes through three phases. In the first phase, he primarily uses spells to cause damage as well as summoning Infernals. Phase Two begins when he reaches 60% health. During this phase, he continues casting spells and begins attacking the tank with his axes. Throughout these two phases, Malchezaar randomly selects five players and reduces their health to one hit point for five seconds.\footnote{A character’s health is measured in “hit points.”} When his health reaches 30%, he enters Phase Three. Malchezaar’s abilities and attacks in this phase are similar to those in Phase One, except his spells and axes now attack random party members (rather than only the tank) and he summons Infernals more frequently.
Serpentshrine Cavern

Serpentshrine Cavern is a twenty-five-person raid dungeon located in the Coiffang Reservoir, Zangarmarsh in the Outlands. Although there are a total of six bosses in this dungeon, the raid discussed in Figure 8 only fought the final boss: Lady Vashj. This fight goes through three distinct phases. The first phase is fairly straightforward. The main tank distracts Lady Vashj while the other players attack her. This continues until her health reaches 70% at which point Phase Two begins.

In Phase Two, Lady Vashj is protected by an impenetrable shield powered by four generators. Although she can not be harmed, she can still attack the players with spells. In order to deactivate the generators, the players must use a Tainted Core (obtained by killing a Tainted Elemental) on each generator. Until this point, the players have only been fighting Lady Vashj. Now they must also contend with Enchanted Elements, Coiffang Elites, and Coiffang Striders. Every minute or so, a Tainted Elemental appears instead of an Enchanted Elemental. Once a player has killed a Tainted Elemental, he or she can loot the Tainted Core which then needs to be taken to one of the generators. Whoever is holding the Tainted Core becomes immobile, however, and it must be thrown to another player. Players continue passing the Tainted Core until it reaches someone standing next to a generator who can use the Tainted Core to deactivate it. Once all four generators are disabled, Lady Vashj’s shield goes down and she is now at 50% health. Players must quickly kill all of the remaining monsters because Phase Three is about to begin.

Phase Three is similar to Phase One, but instead of fighting just Lady Vashj, players must also contend with Spore Bats. While there are only a few at first, the number of Spore Bats quickly increases. These bats spill Toxic Spores which damages the players and contaminate the
ground. Players must fight Lady Vashj while avoiding the rain of poison and the ever-increasing area of toxic ground. This phase continues until Lady Vashj’s death at which points the Spore Bats and their poison disappear.